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BEHOLD THY DAUGHTER

BY THE AUTHOR OF THE CHINA RUN

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BEHOLD THY DAUGHTER

A NOVEL IN THREE BOOKS

BY

Neil Paterson

London
HODDER AND STOUGHTON

'Behold thy daughter,
She hath the winds in her hands
But for a short time only.'

From the Arabic

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BOOK I

CHAPTER I

(1)

THIRZA GARE WAS FOUR YEARS old at the time, and afterwards she used to say that her life began with this incident. In any case, it was her earliest recollection. She was on the braehead with her sister Mairget. Her sister Mairget was eleven and in service on the other side of the world, in Banff, seventeen miles away. Her sister Mairget was with a kind Christian family who gave her a holiday every year, four days, of which the first and last were occupied in travelling, leaving two clear days at home. This was the second of these days and notably fine. The sky was all one piece, and the sea was blue and solid as far as the eye could see. The tide had turned in the Frith an hour ago, but the flood was just beginning to make in Kaysie Bay. It lapped gently on the Maiden Rocks, crept over the Skerries, and inched up the long strip of sand that fitted like a gusset into the crutch of the town.

The town of Kaysie was built on the two widespread legs of land which enclosed the Bay. On the left leg was the Fishertown and the harbour works, and on the right the town proper, separated one from the other by the River Lynn and united (but only in stone) by Telford's New Brig, which spanned the river at its gullet just before it made its last wriggle S round the shingle bar and pushed its tongue into Kaysie Bay.

Kaysie lay in a long uplift of green land on the east side of the Bay, a fine old town with all the appurtenances: a castle, an Auld Kirk with a prominent steeple, a market-place with a cross, a four-faced town clock, a bank, a prison, an old historical cemetery, a park, a school, and twenty-seven inns. Its main streets were wide carriage-ways on which two stage-coaches could safely meet, and for the past three years they, and such lanes as contained the residences of town councillors, had been illuminated by gas. The Fishertown, by contrast, consisted of a huddle of thatched cottages stuck anyhow on the lower reaches of the braes above the harbour, the

houses rising steeply one above the other in layers rather than streets, each haphazard layer communicating with the layer above by footpaths, on many of which two people could not safely meet. The amenities consisted of half a dozen house-shops. There were no roads to be lit by gas, and no inns, as the magistrates were not prepared to grant a licence "for fear of abuse."

The harbour was the hub of the Fishertown. It was enclosed by three sea walls, and consisted of an outer and an inner basin, with a total area of almost five acres, and it had the great advantage that it could be entered at all states of the tide. It was fronted by the Ropery, the warehouses of the Moray Frith Grain Corporation, J. Mair & Sons, Ship Chandlers, the sail-maker's shop, two curing yards, the harbour-master's office, and a miscellany of tarred wooden sheds.

On this day, August 3, 1847, there was unusual activity at the harbour. The fishing-boats, forty or fifty of them, were packed in tight trots on the shore side of the inner basin; and on the north side, shared by both basins, a schooner and a brigantine lay loading. Fishermen were gathered in knots along the shore, and people stood at the doors of the shore-side shops. All were looking in the same direction. They were looking at the North Pier, at the ships, and at the soldiers who were loading them.

It was a very still, fine day. Mistress McKay's notorious line of washing hung across the braehead as slack as any inshore washerwoman's—there wasn't even a kick in her pantaloon legs—and the sounds from the harbour below rose very clearly to the Gare girls as they lay on the sandy patch at the end of the washing-green. They could hear the horses' hooves on the cobbles, the trundling of the cart-wheels between the grain store and the jetty, the creaking of the derricks, the dull thuds as the bales struck the decks, the officer's crisp commands, and—most unusual of all—the mutter of talk that rose ominously from the fishermen grouped round the harbour.

Neither Thirza nor her sister had seen soldiers before. They lay side by side on their stomachs and stared with intense curiosity at the red-coats picketing the entrance to the North Pier. From time to time they looked also at the soldiers who were loading the ships, but as these working soldiers had removed their hats and coats and placed them in a pile at the foot of the Pier Light, the girls found

them less interesting, and concentrated their attention on the *real soldiers,* resplendent in battle array and drawn up in a perfect line across the pier. When a cart came along these soldiers, acting together at an order, pivoted on their end man and swung clear, and when the cart had passed they turned about and repeated the manœuvre, moving in a straight line through an angle of ninety degrees and closing the entrance to the pier. It was perfectly done, and from the braehead resembled the opening and closing of a red-and-white gate. Although the girls were fascinated by the soldiers, they had no friendly feelings towards them. They had heard the local talk. They had seen their father, a mild and quiet man, pound his fist that day on the table and call a curse on Peel, his thieving soldiery, and all his works, and they understood perfectly, without comprehending anything of the reason, that these beautiful scarlet-clad soldiers were their enemies.

It was Mairget who first saw the people swarming from Kaysie. They were visible in the lanes and braes and side streets, the Hawk-hill and the Hilltown, the paths and wynds and closes. They came down in their hundreds on to the Low Street, and from there, in a thickening mass, began to stream shapelessly towards the bridge, a tight jostling wedge, pushing out new leaders like a flexible arrow-head of wild duck, surging forward with that terrible impetus which is at the same time greater and less than human and belongs only to a mob.

Mairget observed this phenomenon in silence and without undue surprise. She watched the column storm the bridge and then, noticing for the first time that they carried banners, she dug her thumb into Thirza's thin back and said, "Look."

Young Thirza looked. "They got flags," she said.

They were the same flags which had been used in the rejoicing at the passing of the Reform Bill and at the accession of the Queen, but now slogans, hastily pinned, obliterated the blue cross of St. Andrews and disfigured the gaudy royal lion. DOWN WITH PEEL, the slogans read. COBDEN FOR EVER. REPEAL THE CORN LAWS. And getting to the crux of the grievance: LEAVE OUR FOOD BE.

At the harbour they heard the roar of the approaching mob. Men rushed up the harbour wall and climbed on the stone capstan and on the bollards to get a view of the Brig. The soldiers left off load-

ing the ships and looked uncertainly in the direction of the sound. Shouting broke out all over the Shore: "They're coming from Kaysie. They're coming in their thousands!" The knots of fishermen moved together into a tight coil round Joe Watt, a veteran of Trafalgar, who, mounted on a rostrum of nets, snatched his bonnet from his white head and, gyrating like a weathercock to force his voice to every point of the compass, addressed them passionately. "For God's sake, men, and for your families' sake—do nothing!"

The officer jerked his arm full length in sharp, imperious gestures, and the soldiers tumbled from the ships, snatched up their tunics, helmets, and muskets, and, half-dressed, wrestling with their clothes, raced to their stations at the entrance to the pier. Doors were flung open all along the braeside. Women hailed each other shrilly, gesticulating towards the harbour, and mothers, cowled in black shawls, slithered down the ash-tracks, calling to their bairns. Mr. Powrie, the Harbour-master, stalked across from his office and spoke to the officer, and the officer nodded and called his men to attention and addressed them, walking along the ranks shouting, while Mr. Powrie, an ex-deep-sea captain, a calm man, listened with his head on one side and his hands clasped on his back underneath his tails. James Mair, the Chandler, locked his shop door and ran up the close for the Sabbath boards for his windows, but he was small and rheumaticky and could not budge them. He called for help, but no one heeded him; so he came out on the quayside in his shirt-sleeves and apron, and scuttled round the edge of the crowd, peering up the gaps and calling for his apprentice or his son Dod.

The men from Kaysie, sighting their objective from the bridge, had broken into a run, and had thus lost what little formation they possessed. Now, a bare cable's length from the harbour, the leaders had halted them and were reforming their original ranks, bringing the banner-bearers to the head of the column and beckoning up some of the older men who had fallen behind in the rush. The crowd numbered in all about eight hundred persons, one-third of the entire population of Kaysie, and was made up of small tradesmen, mechanics, labourers, apprentices, women and children, and geordies from the outlying farmlands. These geordies were easily seen, because they carried scythes or sickles or pruning bills, and were therefore given elbow-room even where the crowd was

thickest. One or two of the Kaysie men brandished a gaff or a skiver, but most were armed only with stout sycamore staffs or broom-handles and many—particularly of those in the first two or three rows—were without weapons of any kind.

As this horde, in a tight and semi-organised mass, began to advance on the harbour, a similar movement was started by some of the hot-heads in the Fishertown. But the older men would not have it. They formed a human barricade three or four feet deep across the Shore from the quay to Mairie's shop, and would not let the young men pass, whereupon Ally Gunn, skipper of the *Jeannie*, broke away and made for the brae, shouting, "All right, lads, follow me; we'll get to them the back way."

Thirza and her sister, agoggle on the braehead, watched the line of men, led by Ally Gunn, sprint into view round the corner of Peggy Bissets's, at the far end of the Fishertown, and begin to ascend the path which led diagonally up the braehead, and which, twisting in senseless zigs and curves, reached its peak twenty yards below the bleaching green on which the little girls sat, thence to drop out of sight behind the higher cottages and to descend crooked as ever to the Brig Road at the other end of the Fishertown.

The men were running fast lest they should miss any of the fun. Some of them had snatched up broken oar shafts from the beach. These oar shafts were heavy, cumbersome burdens, and if a man slipped while carrying one he was liable to lose his balance and to tumble head over heels for several yards down the Slope. When this happened the little girls chortled with delight. Tarry Bowie came up the path with a crutch slung over his shoulder, and Mairget knew that it belonged to his wife's mother, old Sarah, and she thought this very funny indeed. "Look," she said. "Look!" And she laughed along her pointing finger till she got a mild dose of hysteria and lay over on her back and screamed.

Young Thirza, who had never known an afternoon like it, got to her feet and jigged in a frenzy of excitement. "See Andra," she shouted. "See Andra!"

"Where?" said Mairget, getting up on her knees.

"Andra," Thirza said, punching space. "See Andra. See Davy!"

Their fifteen-year-old brother Andrew, the mongrel dog Davy at his heels, was racing along the path below.

"Andra!" the girls screamed. "Andra!"

He looked up and grinned as he recognised them, and their waving increased in frenzy. "Andra, Andra!" they screamed, delighted.

For a moment Andrew faltered, as if he had in mind to leave the path and climb to them, but he cast a glance along the line, and, realising that he would lose his position, bore on. Before he disappeared from sight he pulled a catapult from his pocket, and, brandishing it at his sisters, shouted something that they did not catch.

"Andra's got his clinter," they screamed. They laughed and hugged each other. They were very happy. They had been bewildered and a little frightened, but now they were happy. Andra had spoken to them with a laughing face, and they were completely reassured. They still did not understand what was happening, but they knew at least that it was only fun, and that was a great relief. They were gay and happy and very glad that Andra was there, since it meant that they too now had a share in the general excitement.

They did not see Andrew again, however. Occasionally they caught a glimpse of Davy darting around the fringes of the crowd, but, though they searched hard, they could not find Andrew.

The mob surged forward on the harbour, weapons raised, shouting slogans, demanding entry to the pier. For a moment it paused at the line of soldiers and swayed in indecision, and just then a brougham, furiously driven and carrying the Provost and an assorted collection of the dignatories of Kaysie, arrived on the scene and made for the North Pier. It scattered the stragglers at the rear of the mob and came to a halt against the solid mass of the main body. The Provost put his head and one shoulder out of the window and shouted, "Make way, there. Make way for the Provost!" And the people fell back reluctantly, clamouring and shaking their fists at the Civic Head, who, somewhat at a loss, interspersed little bobs of acknowledgment with his shouts of gangway and made conciliatory gestures with his free arm. The brougham reached and broke the leading ranks of the rioters and pulled up among the soldiers. The Provost tumbled out, and was closely followed by the Town Clerk, the Rev. William Cruickshank, Bailie Soutter and

Bailie Wright, an unknown (the Sheriff-Substitute for Banff), Major Keith of Blair, J.P., Dean of Guild Nicoll, and James Whyntie, Town Officer. It was astonishing to see so many important personages descend from a one-horse carriage, and as another and yet another gentleman emerged, a chanting broke out among the watchers on the Shore. "Five-six-seven-eight-nine-ten!" And then a great spontaneous burst of laughter.

The Provost, assisted by the Dean of Guild, adjusted his chain of office and drew himself to his full height, a process which involved rearranging his anatomy. His robes rose with his chest, and exposed brown boots and several inches of dove-grey trouser ends. He held up his hands for silence, but he was a small man, and those in the rear of the mob could not see him. The noise continued unabated.

"Fellow townsfolk," the Provost shouted. "Fellow townsmen!" He got no farther, for at this juncture it was observed that the master of the brigantine was drawing his gangplanks inboard prior to casting off, and with a roar of anger the mob pressed forward, and, sweeping the soldiers, the Provost, and all the officials before it, streamed irresistibly down the quayside to the ship. A few of the soldiers had retreated from the first rush and taken up stance by the stern of the schooner. They fought valiantly, using their musket-butts as cudgels, but they were only a handful against hundreds, and in a few seconds they were trampled down or forced over the quay into the harbour.

The men of Kaysie descended in swarms on the ships, seized the metal-bound bales of corn and oats, and tossed them on the quayside. In a matter of minutes the ships were unloaded, the bales were hoisted aloft by scores of willing hands, and borne, as if by an army of parasol ants, up the pier towards the warehouse from which they had come. The mob, having achieved its object, was jubilant but orderly. Staves and batons were thrown aside. Men rolled up their sleeves in peace, and, with the good-humoured co-operation of Mr. Morrison, Manager of the Moray Frith Grain Corporation, organised themselves in long conveyer belts to pass the bales from the pierhead to the Grain Loft. While this activity was going on, a messenger arrived on horse from Kaysie with the warning that a detachment of soldiers from Redhyth Barracks was at his heels, but though some of the more prudent of the crowd drifted away, the

majority stood their ground, and the men who were stacking the bales, after a moment's consultation, continued with the task. The pierhead soldiers had meantime been reformed, and, at the Provost's instructions, fixed bayonets and loaded their muskets.

An officer and a detachment of fifty men (having dismounted from a venerable post-chaise and two wagonettes at the far side of the bridge) now rounded the harbour bend, and, bayonets fixed, marched up an avenue of derisive townfolk to the entrance to the North Pier. Here the Provost took charge, and calling both officers to him, held a hurried council of war. It was then decided, in order to avoid bloodshed, to postpone the loading of the ships until the following day, to read the Riot Act, to disperse the crowd (at the point of the bayonet, if need be), and to apprehend the leaders.

When the soldiers went among the crowd, and the people, in long straggling lines, began to move along the Brig Road to Kaysie, the little girls on the braehead lost interest and, holding their skirts above their bare bottoms in obedience to their mother's instructions, slid down the sandy embankment to the path, wiped off, and walked sedately home.

(2)

That evening, when their father was at the fishing, there was a gentle knocking at the door. It was late, past nine o'clock, but Thirza, restless with the day's excitement, heard the first tap and woke immediately.

She listened for a moment, sitting up in bed, then she turned and shook Bathia Gare, her mother. "Mither," she shouted. "The door!"

Bathia sat up in bed. "Is it women?" she called.

"No. It's men."

"Wait then," Bathia said. She got up and lit the cruisie lamp from the fire, pulled on her top garments, and went to the door.

There were two men there: James Walker, Jo, and Sandy Flett. Wise old men, elders. They stood at the door with their caps in their hands, and whenever Bathia saw their bare heads she knew immediately that they had come with bad news. She put a hand on the door-jamb for support.

"Is it my man?" she said.

"No," they said. "It's Andra."

"Drowned?"

"Not drowned," they said. "No, not that. But the sojers have took him, mistress."

Bathia received the news in silence. She stood for several minutes, motionless, her face blank, sorting the information in her slow, deliberate way, while the old men watched her uncertainly, waiting, having nothing else to say.

"Shut the door, Mither," Mairget called from her floor bed at the side of the fire. "I'm cold."

"They're still there, Mairget," said Thirza. When her father was at the fishing Thirza slept in the big bed with her mother and, sitting upright on the bolster, she could now see the open door and the men's shapes beyond her mother. "The mannies are still there," she said sternly. "So hush."

"There was thirteen arrested," Sandy Flett said. "And Andra was one of them. They took twelve from Kaysie and one from the Fishertown, and that was Andra. Twelve men and a boy. The Provost gave the orders himsel', and they put all the thirteen up on a four-wheeler and drove them away."

"I am obliged to you for coming," Bathia said. Even at a time like this she remembered to be polite. She and her husband Alexander Gare were Portknockie folks. They had come to Kaysie Fishertown when she was carrying Andrew, only sixteen years ago, and were therefore still among strangers and minded their manners accordingly. "My man is at sea," she said, "so I won't be askin' you in. Did they hurt him any?"

"Andra? Na na, he's right as rain."

"Mither," Mairget called. "What is it, Mither?"

"My bairns," Bathia said with a backward glance. She shifted her feet, tightened her grip on her bodice neck, and set the door moving. "Good night," she said, speaking to each man separately. "Good night. And thank you baith for coming."

"Mither, what was it?" Mairget was saying. "Mither!"

"The sojers has took Andra," young Thirza informed her.

"Is it true, Mither?"

"It's time you were asleep," her mother said. "Lie down in your bed this minute and get to sleep. A fine state you'll be in at dawn

the morn's morn when you leave for Banff an' you up and awake this time o' night. Now put you heid down immediate, and get to sleep."

"But is it true, Mither, what Thirza says?"

"Ay, it's true," Bathia said. "But there's nae use talkin' about it. There's nothing we can do, leastwise not to-night. The sojers have got him, true. But the sojers is better nor the sea. Now shut your eyes and slip away. As for you, Thirza, you get happit this instant or you'll feel the weight o' my hand."

There was an unusual sharpness in her mother's voice. Thirza obediently descended into the bed and pulled the blankets to her neck. "Mither," she said. "Where has the sojers took Andra?"

"I dinna ken."

"Where do you think?"

"I canna think. Dinna fash me."

To Thirza's astonishment her mother got into bed without extinguishing the lamp, turned her back, and immediately burrowed deep under the blankets.

"Mairget," Thirza said, whispering. "My mither's forgot to douse the lamp."

"Ay," said Mairget.

Thirza waited for a minute or two, then, as her sister showed no sign of moving, she said, righteously, "Put it out."

Mairget extinguished the light.

"Mairget!" Thirza said after a short silence. "Mairget, I just thought on Davy! Has the sojers took Davy too?"

"I dinna know."

"Maybe the fleshers have got him."

"Ah. Dinna say that, Thirza!"

"I don't think the fleshers have got him. Do you, Mairget?"

"No."

"I think he's too wee for the fleshers, Mairget."

"I'm sure he is. I never seen a buoy Davy's size yet."

Thirza, her eyes wide with this new horror, reflected on all the inflated dog-skins that she had ever seen. Her father, and indeed all the fishermen, used either inflated dog-skins or bullock bladders, heavily tarred, as buoys for their herring nets, and these were supplied by Messrs. Imlach & Son, Fleshers, who kept a dog farm as

an annex to their shambles. When the Town Officer came upon a stray dog he handed it over to Messrs. Imlach, who were bound by law to keep the animal for a week. If at the end of that period it had not been claimed by its owner, the fleshers were entitled, on the payment of twopence to the Town Officer, to dispose of the dog as they thought fit, and as they made a handsome profit out of treated dog-skins, they invariably thought fit to slaughter it. Ever since she had been old enough to understand this, Thirza had feared that the fleshers would get their hands on Davy. She gave the matter a great deal of thought, laboriously taught herself to construct a clove hitch in order to be able to tie Davy up, followed him on his solitary expeditions on the braehead, and prayed for him daily. When he was lost, which was frequently, she refused her food, and haunted the vicinity of the shambles. Once, greatly daring, she had exercised her prerogative as a member of the public to inspect the "kennels." She had presented herself at the Fleshers' Shop and demanded to "see if my dog's in-bye," and Mr. Imlach, Senior, highly amused at her request, had personally conducted her over the premises. For the most part, however, she made do with private sorties to the back of the shambles. Here she had discovered footholds on the five-foot wall, and, with intense concentration and frequent barking of her bare shins, she was able to hoist her face higher than the level of the broken-glass barrier which topped the wall, and thus, clinging desperately, to spy out the lie of the land and satisfy herself that Davy was not yet a captive. This dread was the bane of her young life.

The rest of the family might worry—and did—about the price of corn, the potato famine, the state of the fishing. Thirza went her way, unconcerned, tightening her belt when necessary, accepting her occasional stomach pangs as a matter of course. She knew, from daily repetition, that she was in God's hands, and she trusted Him implicitly, in His own good time, to feed, clothe, and protect her. She did not know that poverty existed, and she would have been amazed to learn that she suffered from it. She was perfectly happy, save only for this one fear for Davy's skin. When she looked pale and her eyes became ringed, it was because she had had a bad bout of anxiety for Davy, and when she woke with a cry in the night, it was as the result of a nightmare in which she had wit-

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nessed one of the gruesome stages in Davy's conversion into a herring buoy.

She decided now to reconnoitre the shambles first thing in the morning. Meantime, she put up her hands and prayed for Davy, added a postscript for her brother Andrew, writhed round on her stomach, and then, propelled by a new thought, completed the turn. She propped herself up on her elbows.

"Mairget," she said. "Do sojers use nets and buoys?"

"No."

"Truly?"

"No, of course they don't. Sojers don't go to the fishing. Now get to sleep."

"All right," Thirza said. "Mairget, I hope the sojers has got him rather than the fleshers."

"Get to sleep," Mairget commanded, but she could not resist adding: "We call them butchers in Banff."

"What?"

"The fleshers. We call the fleshers *butchers*."

"Well, I hope they haven't got him," Thirza said.

She closed her eyes and looked at the pictures in her head. They were the pictures of the day's events, and were faithfully engraved on her mind, sharp and hard and pure as mezzotints. She re-examined the soldiers and the ships. She halted the Kaysie mob on the bridge and inspected it at leisure. She had another look at old Joe Watt and Mr. Powrie and Mr. Mair, the Chandler. She waved to Andrew, listened carefully to his shout, but again failed to understand it. She screwed up her eyes against a glimpse of Davy scampering along a lane in the mob, and concentrated instead on the fat grey mare which had drawn the Provost's brougham. She noted the lather of sweat which extended to the sheared line of its flanks. "Bonnie sheltie," she said. She saw the Provost alight from the carriage, and she paid particular attention to the jiggling which went on with his chain. She watched the mob surge forward over the thin barrier of soldiers and, surveying the scene without excitement, she saw much that she had missed before. She saw the Provost get to his feet and fall a second time. She saw him being helped to a space at the harbour wall, where he untwisted his chain, dusted himself, and walked three short steps this way and three

short steps that, like a plump and ruffled pigeon. She saw a soldier in the act of falling backwards over the edge of the quay, his hands up, and his musket preceding him in a graceful arc towards the water. She saw the ships rise higher in the basin as their cargo was tossed ashore, and she saw the great stretch of wheat blot out the people who carried it, and crawl, as if on its own legs, up the pier.

An unusual sound penetrated her thoughts and brought her sharply back to the present. She raised herself on her elbows and lay rigid, listening.

"Mairget," she said. "Mairget, are ye sleepin'?"

"What is it now?"

"Mairget," she said. "I think my mither's greetin'."

Mairget did not reply.

"Mairget!"

"For mercy sake, go to sleep," Mairget said sharply. "For mercy sake, and don't talk so daft! And good night."

"Good night, Mairget," Thirza said, comforted. It was *daft* to imagine that her mother was crying. Her mother never cried. Nevertheless, she went on listening, and after a little she fancied that she could hear not only her mother but Mairget also, and that both were crying. She was greatly concerned, but she was also very tired. She yawned, and as she did so her taut muscles relaxed and she sank back into the bed and went to sleep.

(3)

Davy was at the door next morning.

It was three weeks, however, before they heard from Andrew, and then they received a letter—the first that Thirza had ever seen. It was a long white package with an orange-red stamp of the young Queen's head and a blue wax seal. Alexander Gare laid it face up on the table, and they all looked at it with respect.

"That is Andra's thumb," Thirza's father said.

Thirza could see no thumb, but was prepared for anything.

"A wunnerful thing the post," her father said.

"Open it," her mother said.

Thirza understood that this was a crisis, and, without raising her eyes from the letter, put up her hand and took a firm grip of her mother's apron. "Open it, Father," her mother said. "Go on."

Alexander Gare took his bowie knife from his pocket and wiped the blade on the seat of his trousers. "I will, then," he said. He picked up the envelope between his thumb and forefinger, and investigated it with the blade of his knife.

"Along the seal," Bathia said.

He slit open the envelope along the seal and withdrew a folded sheet of paper. He opened this with great care, and, holding it at arm's length, scrutinised it doubtfully.

"It's from Andra. Andra has a right bad hand," he said at last.

"What's he say?" Bathia demanded. "Speak up, man."

"I canna read it," Alexander said reluctantly. "I canna make headway with this kind of writing that Andra makes. Andra has a remarkable bad hand."

"Is't the right way up?"

"I reckon so." He turned the sheet end for end and gave it a fair trial. "This way up and that way up," he said, "it's still a remarkable bad hand. We'll have to get the Minister on till't lass. I'll just take it overbye to the Minister's and get a readin' the noo."

He would have folded the letter, but Bathia said, "Wait." She reached over and took the sheet and smoothed it reverently on the table. "You're sure and certain this is our Andra's?"

"Ay, it bears his mark."

"Is that it?" she asked, pointing.

"No." He made a careful examination of the sheet. "There," he said at last. He put his finger on it. "There. That's it."

Thirza, interested, watched her mother bend over the table and run her hands lightly, like a blind woman's, across the sheet. She pressed her finger-tips several times on the group of letters which had been identified as Andrew's mark, and then, straightening suddenly, she turned a cold and remote face to her husband and said, "Take it and go now."

Thirza said, "Can I come with you and the letter, Father?"

No one paid any attention to her. Her mother reached into the closet for her father's Sabbath bonnet and her father put it on without comment and went out. Thirza gave Davy, asleep at her feet, a well-directed kick. He rose, wagging his tail, and she jerked her head to him and edged unobtrusively to the door.

Thirza and Davy caught up with Alexander Gare as he turned

off the ash path on to the Shore, but Thirza was in no hurry to be noticed, and walked a few paces behind until they had passed through the Fishertown, crossed the bridge, and penetrated deep into the Low Street of Kaysie; then, feeling that she had come so far that she was unlikely to be ordered back, she advanced to level terms, skipping nonchalantly.

"So you're here!" her father remarked.

She avoided his eye. "Yes, Father."

There was no further conversation. A few minutes later they reached the condemned cottage which, since the Disruption, had served as the Free Kirk Manse. The Minister was not at home, but Mrs. Simson, his wife, a sharp woman, tall and bony, with a voice like a corncrake, threw the door wide open to reveal a ramshackle, shored-up stairway, and invited them to step inside.

"It'll be about Andra," she said.

"Ay. We had a letter."

"So I was hearin', and you would be wanting the Minister to read it, no doubt. Well, step inside and give it here, an' I'll read it to you masel'."

There was a moment's hesitation. It was unthinkable that a woman could succeed where Alexander Gare had failed. He coloured perceptibly. "It's not the reading exactly."

"Weel, what is't then?"

"It's a matter of consultation."

"You want to speir his advice, is that it?"

"Ay, that's it, mistress," Alexander said, relieved.

It was arranged that Mrs. Simson would tell the Minister of Alexander's visit, and that the Minister would call on the Gares that evening.

"You sure you don't want me to read you the letter?" she asked.

"Quite sure," Alexander said.

Thirza noted the exchanges without understanding them. As they walked back to the Fishertown she cross-examined her father.

"Could that wifie really read Andra's letter? She said she could."

"She could read some letters," Alexander Gare said cautiously.

Thirza considered that. "I didna ken that wifies could read, Father."

"There's some as can."

"Well, well." Thirza turned this surprising information over in her mind, took from it what she could, and stored it for reference. "Will I be able to read, Father, when I grow up?"

"God preserve us from sic a calamity."

When her father spoke to her in big words it usually meant that he was joking. She studied the available portion of his face, but found no sign of humour there. His brows were drawn and his eyes were remote and unfathomable. Thirza could not understand it. If a wifie like Mrs. Simson could read, why should it be a heavy voice and big words when she asked if she too would some day be able to read? What was a calamity? First time she found her mother in a good humour she would ask her. She would ask about the reading too. She would like fine to read. She saw that it made people powerful to be able to read, and she decided that she would become a beautiful reader like the Minister, able not only to read books, but hands too, even remarkable bad hands, like Andra's.

(4)

The Minister came at dusk, just as Alexander Gare was about to return to Kaysie for him. He was a small, thick-set man, with lumpy shoulders and short violent arms, and when he knocked on a door he hammered like the military. He was very ugly. He had had the pox, and as a result hair grew only on one side of his face and there in wisps and tufts. His nose was large and bulbous, and his eyes were invariably flecked with blood. When he first came to Kaysie in 1840, the boys had nicknamed him "Whisky Johnny," and, though everyone now knew that he was a teetotaller, the name had stuck. In the Fishertown they had given him another name. When they realised that he wore a wig, they had named him *the Hypocrite,* and they had stayed away from the Kirk in their hundreds. In the first three years of his charge the Rev. John Simson found almost every door in the Fishertown barred against him. When folks had marriages or deaths, they got old MacGregor from the neighbouring parish, notwithstanding the expense, and the bairns went unchristened.

Then in 1843 came the Disruption, and John Simson, the Hypocrite, along with 479 of his fellow-ministers, signed the Deed of Demission, and for his conscience' sake and for the spiritual free-

dom of the Kirk, quitted the Church of Scotland for all time, quitted his big manse and his prosperous glebe, and, penniless, moved into the condemned cottage in Arklay Street. He held his first service as a minister of the Free Church in one of Fyntie's Barns. The Fishertown was there to a man. There was such a press of people that not a quarter of them could be accommodated in the barn, and John Simson preached his sermon in the open air, speaking from the top of a hayrick, and using as his text Matthew xvi. 26: "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" The lairds, the prosperous tradesmen, the Tory voters—in short, the money—stood fast by the Auld Kirk, and by the young smooth-faced minister who was installed in John Simson's place in manse and pulpit, but the Progressives and the little men of Kaysie and the whole of the Fishertown seceded and went into the wilderness with Whisky John Simson, once known as the Hypocrite, but now, simply and affectionately, as *the Minister*.

When the Minister entered a house he did not stand on ceremony. He was a busy man. Unlike his colleague of the Auld Kirk, he did not come to while away an hour. He came on business, and he saw no reason, he said, why God's business should not be conducted as smartly as any other. He claimed to be the quickest christener in the county, and he certainly was the quickest catechiser. He could catechise a group of twenty in half an hour, including two questions to each person, a discourse, a prayer, and a blessing. When he came to visit the sick or aged, he stayed for only a few minutes. But though his visits were short they were frequent. In this way he kept himself informed of everyone's affairs, and if there was trouble in a house he lived on the doorstep. He had already visited the Gares several times since Andrew's arrest, and he had organised and sent off a testimonial.

Thirza connected his visits with the Shorter Catechism and feared him excessively. She was in the floor bed by the side of the fire when his knock rattled the door, and she immediately screwed up her eyes and pretended to be asleep.

There was no need for preliminaries. Alexander Gare handed over the letter, and the Minister, standing close to the cruisie lamp, began to read.

"'My dear Parents and Sisters,'" he read. "'You can consider my feelings when I must inform you that I am now sentenced to ten years' transportation. I was accused on a deposition signed by three Kaysie men, including, I am told, a councillor, in which they did state that I had fired my catapult at one of the military, whereby in so doing I did grievously damage him to the extent that he did lose an eye. But this is not true, for though I fired my catapult, I did so without intent to harm, firing high so that I struck no human being, neither on the face nor head nor elsewhere, and verily that is the truth as God is my judge. Dear Mother, I little thought, when I parted with you on the morning of that day, it was never to meet again, for they say here in prison that few men return from their transportation. If it is God's will I would be thankful if He should call me by death before I shall be bound in chains of degradation, surrounded by hardened sinners and the Dregs of Humanity, and them and them only for my companions. Oh, I am lost for time and eternity! To be ten years with such company! Pray for me that the Lord will strengthen me in this sad state. Poor Father, you will have no one now for your baiting and Geordie will have to get somebody else for the boat. I got the encouragement and the letter of character which Mr. Simson sent from you all, but they were no good. The judges would not allow them to be read, saying that it was necessary that the people of our coast should be set an example, so that all might know that their behaviour was a shameful disgrace, in that they did try to prevent the shipping of corn to their distressed brothers in the farther Highlands when they themselves had a sufficiency, which I did not know to be so until I heard the judge declare it. My dear Mother and my Father and my Sisters, I have to leave you in God's hands, and trust that He will look out for you and provide you with all that is necessary, and that the fishing will be good and you will always have enough to eat, and I trust that you will not forget me, your son and brother, and will pray for me each day and ask Mr. Simson to pray for me too, and somebody will take care of Davy for me please, and God bless you all. Your dutiful son, Andrew.'"

The Minister finished his reading and laid the letter on the table. No one spoke, and presently he picked up the letter again, folded it carefully, and replaced it in its envelope. Thirza, struck by her parents' silence, looked at them curiously. Her mother stood erect by the window, stiff as a board, her face wooden and her eyes fixed without expression on a spot above the Minister's head. Thirza's father stood at the near side of the table, his back to her. He shook his head several times like a man with dust in his hair, and then he turned to his wife. His lips moved soundlessly. After a moment he cleared his throat and said, "It's God's will, lass."

"God's will be damned!" the Minister said, shouting. "It's a rash and abominable injustice." And he tore the wig from his head, threw it to the ground, and stamped upon it. "What has the Lord to do with the powdered nincompoops that sit in the Courts in Edinburgh? If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him. But this is not a judgment, it's an act of bile and spleen against as fine a lad as ever touched the communion cup. Be damned to them all, I say"—and he pounded like an apoplectic on the table—"for false judges and corrupt and venomous blind gowks o' men! Be damned to them for their pomps and their vanities and their coorse and callous incompetence!" With a visible effort he refrained from striking the table again. He pulled himself together, ran a hand over the veins that sat like a tangle of cordage on his bald red head, and, breathing heavily, lowered himself to his knees. "God forgive me. Let us pray," he said.

Thirza could contain herself no longer. The Minister was kneeling on his wig, and she could not draw her eyes away from this fearsome sight. Crouching on all fours like a terrified animal, she raised an arm and pointed. "His heid's aff!" she screamed. "His heid's aff!"

The Minister tush-tushed her. Her father, on his knees, said harshly, "Hold your tongue." Her mother, erect and unseeing, ignored her.

Thirza wept bitterly. "He's sitting on his heid," she said.

"Here," the Minister said. "Here!" He scooped up his wig and jammed it on the back of his head. "There now, if you're quite satisfied, maybe I can commence with my prayer."

CHAPTER II

(1)

IT WAS A LONG TIME before Thirza really understood what had happened to her brother Andrew. Her mother would not allow Andrew's name to be mentioned in her presence, and her father, when questioned, said shortly, "They've sent him over the sea."

Thirza fastened eagerly on this clue and henceforth haunted the harbour.

Every time a strange ship came into Kaysie, Thirza and Davy would be on the quay to meet it. No matter how enticing the game, if the flag indicating an incoming ship was hoisted at the pierhead, Thirza would leave her companions on the braes and race down to the harbour. Sometimes, when the weather was very bad, the only other person on the quay would be the Harbour-master himself, and he, seeing the sober-faced little girl and the black and white mongrel dog and knowing their quest, would shake his head and say gravely, "I fear he's not here to-day, Thirzy. Better go on home and get dry now." But she wouldn't. She had to see for herself. She would walk the length of the ship on the edge of the quay, scanning each face. Sometimes she would jump on board and shout shrilly to the master. "Hey, mister," she would say. "You got my brother Andra Gare inbye?" The men of the coasting ships which called regularly at the Moray Frith ports got to know her well. They looked out for her as they came into harbour and were prepared to make a fuss of her, but she wanted nothing from them save an answer to her questions. She had two. Was her brother on board? Had they seen him? "Nay," the crusty old sea-dogs would say. "Nay, lass, not this time."

When it blew hard from the south-east, ships bound for Aberdeen were driven past their destination and, running before the gale, would sometimes round Kinnaird Head and seek shelter in Kaysie Bay. At times there were as many as a dozen fine ships

riding at anchor in the Bay, and then the people of the town would take a walk up the braehead of an evening and deduce, with hull and spars and trim for clues, where this ship came from and that, and what each carried. Tea clippers from the China seas; barques with sugar from Mauritius or the Philippines or Java; brigantines with marble from Italy; currant boats from Greece; fat Dutch herring-buses; Norwegian whalers; Welsh schooners loaded with slate; sturdy timber brigs from the Baltic—square-rigged ships and fore and afters, ships of all kinds and of all nationalities—the Fishertown studied and classified each one while Thirza, with Davy at her heels, moved among the knowing groups of grown-ups, listening attentively, absorbing every understandable word, filing the facts away in her neat and voracious memory.

If the storm was of any duration, gigs would be launched, and boats'-crews, drenched by the chops of the Bay, would put the more daring of the masters ashore to purchase a leg of Scotch beef perhaps or a mull of snuff, and to sample the tavern life of the town. Many a time Thirza trudged across to Kaysie at the heels of a foreign master bound for the *Capercailzie* or the *Black Bull Inn*. She would escort him to the door, wait for him, and—at a discreet distance—convoy him back to the harbour. Sometimes she would try a question or two—usually had he ever been to Australiey?—but as the master did not understand her questions nor she his replies, she was content for the most part merely to observe him. This she did minutely, noting all his oddities and magnificences, the texture of his clothing, the quality of his ear-rings, even the pitch and inflexion of his foreign voice. If other children asked for pennies and got them, she too asked, but she did not really care for this aspect of the local excitement. If she was given a strange coin she tried it out on blind old Mrs. Fleeman, and if Mrs. Fleeman rolled it back across the counter to her, she threw it away. She did not follow these foreign seamen for what she could get, as the other children did, but for what she could learn; and, though she learned very little, nevertheless that little was more than many of the fisher-folk learned in a lifetime. She learned that foreigners were human. She learned that the world extended beyond the boundaries of Kaysie, and she learned to think without the prejudices of the Fishertown. Thus, in a small way, she learned to take

a cosmopolitan view of the world, and she learned this at first hand, and at the age of five.

Once, despairing of Andrew, she took her life in her hands and accosted the Minister on the Shore. "You know everything," she said judiciously. "Well, where's my brother Andra?"

"In Australia," the Minister said. "God willing."

"That's what I heard. When will he come back?"

"I don't know, child."

"Does anybody know?"

"Nobody."

"Does God know?"

"Yes," the Minister said. "God knows. We believe that He knows everything."

"Well, maybe," Thirza said, edging a sharp glance at her adversary, "maybe some day He might let on to you."

The Minister was taken aback.

"You being a minister like, He might call you in the night, and if He does, be sure to speir about Andra Gare."

"I'll do that," the Minister said, amused. "I'll let you know if I hear anything, but it's unlikely. God appears only to His chosen few, and so far I have not been among their number."

Thirza was not surprised. She nodded gravely and tried another tack.

"The judges sent him away," she said. "What are judges?"

The Minister hummed and hawed and scratched his neck. Thirza watched with an intense, fixed stare. She was aware of doing brawly in standing up to the Minister. She stood rigid, waiting.

"Judges," the Minister said, "are men who sit in judgment over their fellow-men in the Courts of Justice. They are the men who administer the Law. Do you understand that?"

"No," Thirza said.

"Well," the Minister said, "that's about the best I can do. The judges are the representatives of the Queen, and they are appointed by those in authority to sit in judgment over all who break the laws of the land and to convict them and punish them when necessary."

"They're the Queen's men?" Thirza said, frowning.

"Not exactly. They're the public's men. They're put there by the

Government, by the people of this country, or by those of them at least who have the right to vote. The Provost, the merchants, all those in positions of wealth and authority."

Thirza considered that carefully. "And do the judges wear uniforms like the sojers?"

"They wear gowns," the Minister said, "and wigs."

He saw her eyes glaze over, and his lips quirked immediately in a smile. "I'm not a judge," he said, patting her shoulder. "Now run along, and don't fash your head with judges and such-like things."

(2)

It was a bitter year. The potato crop was a failure and the harvest was poor. Although the Bill repealing the Corn Laws had passed through the Commons, its provisions had not yet been made law. Home corn was at a premium, and foreign corn, which ought to have been cheap, was forced up to a prohibitive price by Peel's sliding scale of import duties. Famine stalked the land. Even the rich grumbled, and the poor died.

The herring fishing, mercifully, was good.

Day after day the boats came in with heavy catches, and during the early part of the season there was great stir and activity in all the ports along the Moray Frith. Soon after dawn, when the first of the boats was sighted, the women began to move down to the Shore. If the weather was suitable, most of the skippers preferred the beach to the harbour, and they would run their boats up on the sand. Whenever the oars struck bottom, the crew jumped into the knee-deep sea and, helped by willing hands on the shore, hauled the boats up high and dry. The womenfolk now took over and began to load carts, barrows, and creels with the precious herring. On a good day the whole female community might labour from early morning till late in the afternoon, toiling between the boats and the curing yards.

In the yards, themselves, there was tremendous bustle as each new load was heaved indiscriminately into the great tubs or farlins. The gutters, in crews of two, their hands nimble as pianists', slit the fish, and in one deft movement removed viscera and gills. Whenever they had filled a basket they emptied it into one of the rousing-tubs, and then the packer, sitting inside a circle of baskets

and tubs, rhythmically roused and packed. Coopers marked and covered the barrels, trundled up new barrels, trundled off filled barrels; while at the other end of the yard other coopers were up-ending matured casks, opening the vents and running off pickle, refilling, resalting, flagging leaking joints, blowing and bunging tight, and scratching on the curing marks.

This activity continued daily till the middle of July, and then some of the more experienced of the curers began to go slow, to pay off the extra hands they had engaged at the beginning of the season, and to question their contracts with the fishermen. By the end of the month many of the smaller yards had closed, and even the biggest firms were taking only a small proportion of the catch that was offered them. There was no lack of fish. The yards were cluttered up with filled barrels, and the boats came in each day loaded to the gunwales. There were herrings galore, but no market to sell them in.

The Irish potato was at the root of the trouble. The Irish potato had the blackleg, and the whole crop was ruined. In losing the potato the poorer Irishman had lost, not only his food, but also the main source of his income, and he now had no money to buy the Scotch herring, which, along with the potato, had made up his staple diet. His condition was piteous, and he died in his thousands, while hundreds upon hundreds of tons of herring lay rotting in dumps along the Moray Frith or were shovelled back by the cran-load into the sea.

The Scots fisherfolk were lucky by comparison. They had no corn, no barley, no oats, no potatoes, but at least they had fish. They ate fish morning, noon, and night. They ate fish of all kinds. When the herring season came to an end and they were hard pressed, they even ate dogfish and sour skate. They ate shellfish and tangle and dulse and many kinds of wrack. For change of diet they impregnated their fish with ammonia by soaking it with dried dung cakes, and they reverted to the dead custom of making *blaun*. They stacked a pile of cod and ling against the walls of their living-rooms until, partially fermented and decomposed, it stank to high heaven, and then they told each other that this was a delicacy and baked it into cakes and ate it with relish.

Everyone in the Fishertown suffered. A few—mostly among the

older people—appeared outwardly to hold their own, but the majority dwindled visibly. The children were the first to show signs of breakdown. Their skins clouded over, became mottled, pimpled, and finally covered with sores. Their eyes were sunken. They complained of stomach pains and headaches and sore gums. In the worst cases teeth began to drop out.

Thirza did not suffer unduly. She was on hard tack like all the rest, but she had learned to make use of her opportunities at the harbour. She graciously permitted the visiting sailors to spoil her, and from every ship she boarded to enquire about Andrew she would now return with some small offering for her mother—a cabbage perhaps, half a dozen leeks, a handful of carrots, bones for the stockpot, a chunk of fat, the end of a ham, fruit, sometimes sweetmeats. Her gleanings were always modest, but Bathia Gare was a housewife of parts, and knew how to make much out of little. She scolded Thirza repeatedly for begging, but Thirza, listening to the sound of her voice rather than her words, knew that her mother was not angry and did not really mean what she said. She continued to board the ships, and as she became more experienced and more successful, she took to carrying her mother's shop bag of bleached sacking slung ostentatiously over her shoulder. She did not fail to note that her mother never scolded her when she set out with this bag, but only when she returned with it full.

Various schemes were set afoot in the locality to relieve the famine. The large landowners made a limited amount of wheat and oats available to the poor of the town at specially reduced rates, and in November the Town Council opened a Soup Kitchen in Urquhart Street.

This Soup Kitchen was a godsend. It functioned from 12 till 3 p.m. each day except Sunday, and served upwards of seven hundred people with hot dinners. Usually the dinners consisted of broth, but occasionally there was meat instead, and once in a while you got a handful of oatmeal in addition to your soup. Even if you only got broth you always found large lumps of fat in the swill at the bottom of your pail and, though this fat was not very pleasant in the soup, it was valuable, and could be put to good use later.

At first the Soup Kitchen allowed one member of a family to draw for all, and the long queue which stretched at times from the

top of Urquhart Street to the foot of the Hawkhill was composed almost entirely of children, all carrying pails or basins. Many of the children were ill, and would have been content to stand quietly in the line, but there was always a proportion of wild ones who could not contain their animal spirits and who delighted in starting up boisterous games—tug-of-war, fight the French, tackie, snow the fishers, and so on—games which spread the whole length of the queue and threw it into indescribable confusion. Some of the older boys had a habit of breaking into the queue wherever they thought fit, and fights were frequent. It was not uncommon for a dozen fights to be raging at the same time. Whole groups were caught up in these skirmishes and fought each other ferociously, often without knowing why. When a Kaysie boy fought a Fisher-boy, which was frequently, the entire mob of children split into two armies and, girls as well as boys, engaged in battle royal.

Thirza played only a minor part in these disturbances. She was too young to be a leader, and she was somewhat awed by the violence of the bigger boys, but she was ready for any reasonable devilment. When the queue played bands, striking their pails and basins with lids and stones, she entered wholeheartedly into the cacophany and drummed with the loudest. She stood up for her rights and fought fiercely for her place in the queue. When the occasion demanded she would jostle and scream to her limit, and she would kick a Kaysie boy as soon as look at him.

Most of the helpers in the Soup Kitchen were voluntary workers —the wives of professional men and prosperous tradesmen. Ladies of such quality were naturally appalled at the behaviour of the hooligans they served. Mrs. Sievwright (Arnot & Sievwright, High-class Drapers) once spent the entire three hours counting the number of persons who said *thank you*. There were only twenty-eight or thirty-eight, she could never quite remember which, and of these only seven added *Ma'am*. When you considered all that you were doing for them, the sacrifices, the time you spent—there had been 643 of them that day (or was it 634?)—well, Mrs. Sievwright said, so far as she was concerned it certainly made her wonder just what the country was coming to. Admitted, they were mostly children, but didn't that make it worse? In *her* day even the humblest and youngest knew how to drop a curtsy, but of course that was before

the Reform Act and all this alarming new radicalism which was sweeping the country to ruin. She had a wonderful way of hitting a nail on the head, of being incontestably right. "If you want to see what the country is coming to," she would say, "just look at the rising generation." And she would roll her eyes piously aloft. "To think that they can't even say *thank you*!"

That sort of thing was vexing. But it was the fights and the rough games—"the unrestrained violence and bloodshed," as the Convener of the kitchen wrote to the Town Clerk—which alarmed and disturbed the ladies "to such an extent that some are nigh to fainting, some are unfit to carry out the duties owing to the trembling of their limbs, and all, without exception, are *affronted*." This, coming from the doughty Convener of the Soup Kitchen, was heavy gunning and the Council acted forthwith, appointing J. C. Christie, M.A., late master at Kaysie School and now destitute, as Curator of the Soup Kitchen queue.

Christie was as unsuccessful with the queue as he had been with the school, with the important difference that the children did not now cease to come to the queue, as, under his charge, they had ceased to come to school. Christie was a scholar, an Honours Graduate of Aberdeen University, a classical poet, and a gentleman. He was no disciplinarian. If a boy said, "Why do they call you the drunk dominie?" he would seriously consider and reply, "They call me dominie because I have held several appointments as schoolmaster. I fear they may call me 'Drunk Dominie' because I have on occasion resorted too freely to spirituous liquor."

Poor Christie did what he could. If a good-going fight started, and it so happened that he was sober, he would run for the Town Officer. When he was drunk he would join in, or sit down at the roadside to watch. He was a tall, skinny man. Even in the days of plenty he had been notably thin, and now he was down almost to the bone. His shoulders sloped away like an arrow-head. His great domed skull perched precariously on a long scraggy turkey-neck, and his wrists and ankles projected like drum-sticks. His face was hairless, but a fine mane of unbrushed auburn hair, starting late on his forehead, swept down over the back of his head to his shoulders. His eyes were large and lustrous. He wore voluminous rags, and when he ran, with his peculiar hopping gait, down the

line of children, begging for silence, his cloaks flapped in tatters about him so that he looked like a great emaciated vulture. "Hush, laddies," he would say. "Hush, lassies. Hush now. There now, I beg you, else I shall be discharged." The boys ignored him or noticed him only to bait him, but some of the younger girls, including Thirza, were uncertain of him. They listened for his soft whispers, so that they might obey them implicitly, and when he thrust his face at them in passing they would shrink back, terrified, against the wall.

In the middle of December a brash child knocked at the door of the Provost's house and offered her pailful of soup for sale. It was then discovered that when there were vegetables in the shops, several of the children habitually sold their soup. They got a ha'penny a pail for it, and they spent their ha'pennies on vegetables. The ladies of the Soup Kitchen very properly regarded this as an insult, and the Town Council was prodded into further action. New rules were drawn up for the Soup Kitchen, and it now became obligatory for each member of a family personally to draw his or her own *relief*.

As a result of this new measure the character of the queue changed. It lengthened considerably and became docile. The Drunk Dominie's services were no longer required and were dispensed with "at a saving to the town," the Clerk informed the Council, "of two shillings Scotch monthly."

(3)

The Gares were badly hit by the new Soup Kitchen arrangements.

Bathia was ill, and it taxed her to the limit to fit a visit to the Soup Kitchen into her daily programme. She did not regard herself as ill. She thought, and said, merely that she had her trouble again. She was short-winded and tired easily. Sometimes she had a sharp pain across the top of her abdomen, and then she had to sit down and shut herself up like a knife, pushing her face on to her knees. The attacks lasted only for a few minutes and did not distress her unduly. She had had them off and on since Thirza's birth, and she attributed them to her womb, which had never been satisfactory. It did not occur to her to consult the doctor or to

apply for a *Line,* the invalid's certificate which would have exempted her from attendance at the Soup Kitchen and enabled Thirza to draw her portion. She had no truck with doctors. In the Fishertown you had the doctor only when you died. And so, day in, day out, even when she felt only "fair to middlin' " (the worst she ever admitted to), she would set out to walk the two uphill miles to the kitchen at the far side of Kaysie.

It was a novelty to Thirza to be out with her mother and she thoroughly enjoyed it. Most of the children set off at an early hour to dawdle across to Kaysie, but when they called to Thirza to come with them, she would shake her head and say serenely, "I'm goin' with my mither." It pleased her greatly to see Bathia dress for the street, and when the signs indicated that her mother was about to get ready, Thirza would run to fetch her shoes and her best shawl and the garnet brooch which was the only trinket in the house and which Bathia wore as a shawl clasp at her breast. As they walked she would glance up at her mother with pleasure. She did not notice that her mother laboured, but she did notice and was irked when others, hurrying for a place in the queue, overtook them and forged on ahead. On the braes Bathia used to pause repeatedly, and when she did so she would turn about to face the Bay and put her hand up to shade her eyes so that everyone who saw her would know that she had merely stopped to look out to sea.

Although Thirza did not know that her mother was ill, she was well aware that Bathia was unhappy, and she believed—correctly—that Andrew was the reason. She knew that Andrew was her mother's favourite. She did not resent this. He always had been the favourite, and she felt it was his right. She had noticed—she could not help noticing—that ever since Andrew's arrest the atmosphere in the house had changed. Her mother had become silent and moody. You had to be careful nowadays what you said to her. You had to play quietly in a corner and speak only when you were spoken to. Once, for no reason that she knew, Thirza had been thrust outside and the door slammed and bolted on her, and now she was uncertain of her mother. She watched her warily, reading her moods in her face. In the evenings Bathia sat empty-handed, staring into the fire; and Thirza, who missed nothing, noted that

her father, at work with needle and palm on his nets, stole uncertain glances at her mother, asking nothing of her, and fetched and carried for himself.

In these circumstances it was impossible for any of them to forget Andrew, and Thirza brooded daily over her brother's disappearance. She was very bitter. At first she had blamed only the judges, but this had been unsatisfactory since she could not imagine them, and therefore could not hate them. Now, after her conversation with the Minister, she was able to find solid flesh-and-blood enemies. The Provost and all the dignatories of the town; the soldiers, the preventive Coastguard, the Town Officer; the prosperous residenters who wore suits and watch-chains, all the important citizens, even, alas, the ladies of the Soup Kitchen—these were the people who had sent Andrew away. These were the people who conspired with the Queen to appoint judges, who ruled the land, who made and enforced the wicked laws. These were the enemy. Thirza lumped them all together and hated them excessively. She thought of them as *they*. During the whole of her childhood she was obsessed by the idea that the world was split into two groups—the *haves* and the *have-nots*. She had an unerring instinct for the haves. She could tell them immediately. When she got old enough to be rude, she used to say that she could smell them.

CHAPTER III

(1)

DURING THE FAMINE THE DOGS, on the whole, suffered less than their masters. They were not allowed to starve. When the food problem became acute they were killed off. The fleshers' yard was full of dog-skins hung up, like washing, to dry, and the price of a skin dropped by degrees to three ha'pence, which was the lowest in living memory. In the Fishertown only the lurchers and the special pets were spared.

Davy survived precariously. He was a brindled terrier mongrel, with cow hocks, an apple head, a slight squint, and a flesh-coloured nose. He was not an attractive dog. Nobody loved him, except Thirza, and he continued to exist only because he gave no trouble and fended for himself. He was an expert forager, and, having only a small stomach, contrived to keep it filled. He had been known as Andrew's dog and tolerated for Andrew's sake. Now that Andrew was gone, however, his position in the household began to deteriorate. Bathia eyed him with obvious distaste. She spoke of him as "that brute," and grumbled about him daily. It was plain that she resented the fact that Andrew had been taken and the dog spared. In the mornings she swept him out of the house with the broom, and if it had rained during the day, she would not let him in at night. Once he had brought tar into the house, and she had thrown a bucket at him and chased him half down the Slope.

"That's the end," she said in a fury. "He *goes*."

Thirza scrubbed off all the tar. She scraped and polished the floor till it shone, working all morning, irritating her mother as much with her prodigious labour as the dog had with its mess. "You'd never know, Mither," she kept saying, "it's that clean now." She helped furiously with the housework for the rest of the day. She was white and anxious, and in the evening she brought herself to speak.

"You wouldna really send Davy to the fleshers, Mither?"

"And why wouldn't I?" her mother said, snapping.

This was a question beyond the child's power to answer, and the subject was dropped. To Thirza's great relief Davy was admitted without comment that night. Her mother made no further reference to her threat, but Thirza knew very well that she had not forgotten it, and when she saw Bathia's eyes rest broodingly on the dog, she was sure always that her mother was thinking of sending him to the fleshers, and she worried herself sick over this and lived in continual fear for Davy's life.

At the beginning of January a hare was seen in the Fishertown. Some of the dogs got wind of it and chased it up the pier. At the end of the pier the hare jinked the dogs and doubled back, but the crew of the *Amelia* blocked its path, and, cornered, it took a great leap into the harbour. The dogs followed it along the pierside, barking furiously, but none of them would go in after it, and the hare escaped out to sea. It was last seen, swimming strongly, beyond the harbour mouth.

The incident caused a deal of talk in the town. The women vied with each other in describing what they would have done with that hare if they had been lucky enough to get it, and there was some argument as to how many you could feed on a hare and for how long. Thirza did not see the hare, but she heard the talk, and two or three afternoons later she swung a sack over her shoulder, called Davy, and set out to hunt for hares.

When you climbed the braehead you came to a tract of rough ground which sloped gradually up to a wooded plateau. This plateau extended for several miles along both arms of the Bay. Its trees were spruce and fir, and from the sea it looked like a great fur collar thrown round the neck of the town. Although it was known as Kaysie Ridge, the plateau belonged, not to the town, but to two or three big landowners who owned *the country*—the estate and woods on the farther side of the Ridge—and who enclosed their properties with great diligence.

In order to enter the Ridge at the nearest point to the Fishertown, you had to climb a four-foot dyke and then a wire fence. The dyke had been built to keep out animals and did not give you much trouble, but the fence was designed to maim you. It was as high

as a poacher and nearly three feet in depth, and you had to be very careful indeed to get through its entanglements without ripping your limbs or, at the very least, your clothes. In summer you generally took off your frock and threw it over the top of the fence or rolled it up and pushed it through with a stick, but this was not practicable in winter, and Thirza, after some consideration, put the sack over her head and went through on her stomach, edging in inch by inch and using her muffled head as a feeler. By this blind and painful process of trial and error she eventually found a passage, and emerged, red-faced and triumphant, on the forbidden side of the fence.

Davy, who had burrowed through in a rabbit track, was already out of sight. Thirza called him imperiously but without result. She heard him yelp, however, and, placing the direction, plunged into the wood. At first it was hard going. The fir trees were tight-packed and old, and their lower branches grew close to the ground. It was impossible to tunnel under, and Thirza, anxious to catch Davy before he ate too many hares, forced a way recklessly through the thick barriers of branches. She got hopelessly entangled. She got buffeted and scratched. She got very, very bad-tempered, but she pressed on resolutely, determined at all costs to overtake Davy and to fill her bag.

She had no thought that she was poaching. She knew in a vague way that this land was private, and that the owner had put up his dyke and his fence to stop little girls like her from abusing his property and filling their sacks with his hares, but she had an entirely logical mind, and it seemed only reasonable to her to suppose that, having negotiated the dyke and fence, having paid the penalty of intrusion with her bruised head and scratched legs, she had now earned the right to an afternoon's sport in the wood.

After a little she found a path, and was then able to race on with comparative ease, stopping only to shout for Davy and to listen for his answering yelps. Once she caught a glimpse of him in the undergrowth ahead, but he was engaged on his own affairs and paid no attention to her commands. She got very angry. She picked up a broken branch-end and swished it like a whip. "You better come, Davy," she shouted. She had entered the wood with a pretty picture in her mind's eye. In this picture she had just emptied a

bagful of hares at her mother's feet. Her mother was so moved that she could not speak. All she could do—and this was significant—was bend down and clap Davy on the head. There were tears in her eyes, and when she finally straightened up and found her voice she said, "He's a real useful kind of beast after all," and Thirza knew then that she would never have to fear for Davy again—at least not on her mother's account. It was a beautiful picture, but Davy was ruining it.

She stopped, exasperated, at the edge of a clearing and shouted at the pitch of her voice. "Davy, you little runt!" she screamed.

The rabbit and Davy came into sight almost simultaneously, popping out from a clump of ferns at the far side of the clearing and racing straight towards her.

"Go on, Davy!" she shouted.

The rabbit swerved sharply away, with Davy, head down, at his heels. There was a sudden violent explosion. The rabbit sprang in the air and fell dead, and Davy, his tail between his legs, scuttled back into the undergrowth. Thirza stood paralysed. She had heard guns before, but never at close range, and for a moment she did not know what had happened. She stared unbelievingly at the rabbit. Then some movement among the trees caught her eye, and she saw a man lift a gun and examine its smoking barrel. When he stepped out into the clearing she also moved and, running her fastest, reached the dead rabbit a few paces before him. She snatched up the corpse and concealed it behind her back.

"It's mine," she said.

The man blinked down at her in some surprise. He was a tall bearded man, dressed in a black and white check sporting suit, and he had a game-bag slung over his shoulder. He looked like a gentleman.

"I shot it," he said.

"It's my hare," Thirza said.

They eyed each other formally.

"That was your dog, I suppose?" the man asked.

Thirza nodded.

"Where do you come from?"

"Fishertown."

"And just how did you get here?"

"I came in through the fence," Thirza said. She saw that he did not altogether understand this, and she added, "I put my head in the bag."

"Did you tear a hole in the fence?"

"No," she said patiently. "I put my head in the bag."

"And crawled?"

"Yes."

He considered this, estimating Thirza's height and breadth. When confronted with a problem, however small, Richard Carmichael gave it his whole attention, and he now contemplated the situation that had arisen through Thirza's illegal and unexpected entry with as much concentration as he would have brought to bear on a business deal involving hundreds of pounds.

"Call your dog and come with me," he said at last. He held out his hand. "I'll take the rabbit."

"No," Thirza said. She did not know who this man was or what he meant to do with her, but she knew that when he gave an order he was accustomed to have it obeyed. She knew that he was *one of them,* an enemy, and she followed him warily. Whatever else happened, she was resolved that he would not get her precious hare. She slipped it into the sack, and, Davy at her heels, trudged on. She felt neither fear nor curiosity, only a dogged determination to hold on to what she regarded as her own. She hugged the sack to her chest.

After a few minutes they reached a carriage-way, and Richard Carmichael stopped then and waited for her.

"Can't you walk faster?" he asked.

"Yes."

"How old are you?'

"Five."

"Well, walk faster," he said sharply.

Thirza scowled, but obeyed.

(2)

The first time Thirza saw Carmichael House she was impressed only by its size. It was a massive four-story building of vague Renaissance design, topped by circular towers, and notable for the extravagance of its architectural flourishes. In fashionable circles it

might have been regarded as something of a monstrosity, but in its district it was boosted, without qualm, as the last word in architectural elegance, and rumour even had it that the late Duke of Macduff, on first seeing the house, was so struck by the presumption of the parvenu Carmichaels and so overcome by envy that he fell on the spot into a convulsion from which he subsequently died.

Thirza knew nothing of this. Later she was to regard Carmichael House as "a bonny bit of masonry," but on this first visit she appreciated only its incredible and awful size. Following Richard Carmichael, she trudged warily up the drive, her fingers tight on the neck of the sack, her eyes stiff with wonder. As they approached the house a figure appeared briefly, no bigger than a midget, at the great door, and a few minutes later Janet Carmichael and her two children, Robert and Susan, emerged and came towards them.

The children ran on ahead of their mother, slowed down to a walk as they neared their father, and stared with undisguised curiosity at Thirza. Thirza stared right back at them. She did not feel shy and she did not feel hostile. She felt only an absorbing interest in these strange specimens of childhood. "That's a boy," she thought. "And that," shifting her gaze to Susan, "that's a little girl." Having once looked at Susan she could not look away. She examined her from top to toe, pausing at each phenomenon of dress and absorbing it carefully into her memory before passing on to the next.

Susan was dressed, as Susan always was dressed, to attract well-bred attention. Even women who did not like Janet Carmichael granted her this, that she could dress that daughter of hers; and it was true. Janet had a flair for clothes. As a child she had spent her happiest hours dressing her dolls, and when she grew up and, in the fullness of time, found herself the mother of a real live daughter, her delight knew no bounds. She used to say sometimes that she wished that Robert too had been a girl, there was so little you could do with boys. But she said this only when she was tired or Robert was tiresome. She didn't really mean it, at least not altogether. She was very fond of Robert; and she simply adored Susan. She would go to any amount of trouble for Susan's sake. When she had Miss Donald, the Kaysie dressmaker, up to Carmichael House (and she sent the chaise for Miss Donald at least once a

week), she would herself work as hard as any dressmaker and much harder than Miss Donald, who was elderly. Her mouth full of pins, she would labour tirelessly on Susan, adjusting a ruffle here and a pleat there, trying out this with a hem and that with a tuck. "I don't like the collar," she might say. "I think I would prefer something like this." She would turn back the rug and draw with the dressmaker's chalk on the parquet floor. "Or this." Another design. There was always something that she did not like. Her husband, writing a cheque for her London milliner, once said ruefully that she had an artist's lust for perfection, a compliment which pleased her immensely and which she repeated, laughing gaily, to the more intimate of her friends. When people congratulated her on Susan's clothes, she would turn the palms of her hands in a delightfully Gallic gesture. "But look at the material I work on," she would say.

Susan was well worth looking at. At eight she was already a beauty, and a more sophisticated eye than Thirza's might well have goggled at the vision of this pale blonde child in her artful blue and gold ensemble. She wore a blue poke bonnet trimmed with gold silk, from which her yellow hair protruded in a wisp or two at the forehead and a pair of elaborate ringlets at the nape of her neck. Her blue velvet coat was buttoned tightly as far as the waist, where it belled out to reveal the front panel of her dress. This was of ochre-coloured glacé silk, heavily trimmed with embroidered frills, and so very full-skirted that it had to be manœuvred cautiously through the nursery door. When she ran, the weight of her coat prevented any unseemly ballooning. Her skirts merely jigged in a maidenly manner, and revealed no more than the correct seven and a half inches of pantaloon.

The Carmichael family met and halted. Thirza and Davy, who had been following Richard Carmichael at a distance of some twenty yards, also came to a halt and watched the proceedings with unconcealed curiosity.

"For mercy's sake, Richard!" Janet said. "Who do you have there?"

"A poacher."

"Oh, don't be absurd, dear. By the way, I thought you were to be out all afternoon. There was something I had to tell you. Ah,

yes. Simpson came with the box of groceries from London. He said it came in on the *Elsinore*. Don't you think that's a perfectly precious name for a Fraserburgh sloop? And those flies you ordered have come too. At least, I think they're flies. Did you see them, Robert? No, of course you didn't, you were in the library. What is it, Susan? Do stand still, dear. I didn't expect to see you till dinner, Richard. You *did* say you were going out for an afternoon's shooting, you know. Who is she, dear?"

"Some brat from the Fishertown. I caught her poaching."

"Why, Richard!" Janet said, looking directly at Thirza for the first time. "Richard, she's *sweet*! Like a waif by Joshua whosit. What's your name, little girl?"

"Reynolds," Robert said. Robert was twelve and had an excellent tutor.

"Come here, little girl. Robert, how can you possibly know? How old are you, my dear? Richard, you cannot seriously mean to tell me that this angel of a child was poaching! What's your name, dear?"

"She's got a rabbit of mine in her bag," Richard said.

"Mamma," Robert said. "It was Joshua Reynolds."

"Sir Joshua Reynolds," Janet said. "Don't tug at me, dear. I know all about that. Come here, little girl. What did you say her name was, Richard?"

"I didn't say."

"No, of course not. Come here, my dear, don't be frightened. Why, look at her cheeks! She's starving. You poor child, did you walk all the way from the Fishertown by yourself?"

"I came with Davy," Thirza said unexpectedly. She slung the sack over her shoulder and advanced. She had not been paying a great deal of attention to the lady. She had been concentrating on the girl, and she had been thinking, finally, how difficult it would have been for *her* ever to have got through the fence. She was willing to admit that the little girl was very beautiful indeed, but she had come step by step to the conclusion that she could not go through fences, no, nor even over walls. She heard the lady's voice at a distance and she answered absently. "Davy is my dog," she said. "And I'm Thirza."

" And how old are you, Thirza?"

"Five."

"Richard, do you hear that? She's just an infant and she's quite plainly starving. Come, my dear, I'm going to see that you have a good square meal." Her hand closed on Thirza's grubby paw. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Thirza said, screwing her head round so that she could continue to keep an eye on Susan.

"My dear Janet," her husband said. "Your indiscriminate charity——"

"Please, Richard," Janet said firmly. "The child is starving." And she squeezed Thirza's hand. "What a pretty name you have, Thirza. Where did you get it, I wonder? Robert, run on in front and tell Manson that I want to see her. Aren't you coming, Richard?"

"No."

"Dear Richard, you're not cross with me, are you? There was some tobacco for you in the box, the kind you specially like. I ordered it as a surprise for you. You look cross. Why aren't you coming, dear?"

"I already have a drawerful of tobacco," Richard Carmichael said. "And I happen to be out for an afternoon's shooting, as you may remember. When you've fed this child, hand her over to MacGregor. My orders are that he is to put her outside the gates and inspect the fence all along the north side. I said the north side, Janet."

"It's all right, dear, I heard you. I'm not likely to forget, do you think? Look at Robert, what a dawdler he is! Robert," she called. "Do hurry. Susan, give your father a kiss."

"I've seen her before," Thirza said, solemnly raising her free arm and pointing at Susan.

"Have you, my dear? I wonder where?"

"At the sea," Thirza said. "She went into the sea in drawers. Me and Emily and Jessie were gettin' safticks on the rocks, and we hid down and watched, and she went into the sea in drawers, up to her knees. And her mither too."

"That was me," said Janet, amused.

"Yes," Thirza said. "Her mither. They had baith on drawers and they sat down in the sea, and we seen them."

"How delightful!" Janet said, with a trill of laughter. "Richard, do you hear that? Thirza saw us bathing last summer. She appears to have been very shocked by our bathing costumes. Would you also like to have a pair of drawers, Thirza, and go bathing?"

"No," Thirza said. "The sea's nae for sittin' in."

"It's quite nice really," Janet said, "when you get used to it. And it's really very healthful. When will you be home, Richard? Richard! Oh dear, now he can't hear me." Her husband turned and gave her a perfunctory wave and she waved back vivaciously. "Good-bye," she called. "Good-bye, dear. Susan, take my other hand. I'm so disappointed that he wasn't pleased about his tobacco, although you can't ever tell for sure. He wasn't really cross, you know. To tell the truth," she said to Thirza, "he's a sad trial to me at times. Now, let me see—the dog, what are we going to do about the dog?"

"He's very dirty," Susan said.

"He can't come in the house," Janet said. "That's certain. We'll get Manson to take him round to the stables, and she'll have to make sure that the other dogs are tied up. Is he a man dog or a lady dog, Thirza? It doesn't really matter, but I always like to know."

"He's no bitch," Thirza said.

"He's the dirtiest dog I've ever seen, Mamma," Susan said. "And Thirza's dirty too. She'll have to be washed before she sits down at the table. What are we having to eat, Mamma?"

"You naughty child," Janet said fondly. "I didn't say you were going to have anything at all to eat. Why, it's barely an hour since you rose from the table. And Thirza, you oughtn't to use words like that. They're most improper and unladylike. Come now, promise you won't use a word like that again. Let me hear you say it. Do you promise?"

"Yes," said Thirza, who had no idea what the lady was speaking about.

"Are we to have the new truffles from London?" Susan persisted.

"Well, perhaps we might just sample them. That would be a real treat for our little friend. I'm sure you would like that, wouldn't you, Thirza?"

"I dinna ken," Thirza said.

"It's not only her hands that will have to be washed," Susan said, "but her knees and feet too. Mamma, why doesn't she wear shoes?"

"Hush, dear," Janet said gently, applying a now familiar pressure to Thirza's hand. "One doesn't speak about such things. Thirza doesn't wear shoes and stockings because her mother and father are poor and can't afford to buy them for her, and that is why we have to be particularly nice to her, and while we are being nice to her we must also be very careful not to hurt her feelings. Susan," she said to Thirza, "doesn't understand poverty, you see." And she pursed her lips and shook her head. "But you *are* very dirty, you know, Thirza. I think—I feel sure—that washing would be inadequate. We shall have to bath you."

(3)

The Carmichaels' bath was of iron, tinned inside, and enclosed in dark-brown wood. It was the first bath that Thirza had ever seen, and it made a deep and lasting impression on her mind. When Manson, who was to officiate, ushered her into the bathroom and she saw the long coffin-like box veiled in steam, she suspected variously that she was to be boiled and drowned in it, but Manson, who was large and homely and spoke in the familiar Kaysie dialect, soon talked her out of the worst of her fears, and finally gained her confidence to such an extent that she consented not only to be undressed but even to relinquish her hold on the rabbit sack and to step into the bath without it.

Afterwards, there were other wonders. She remembered them vaguely, and credited them with a bulk and virtuosity which they did not possess. For example, the rooms were so big that you could barely see across them; the carpets were soft as swansdown; the pictures in the hall were bigger than doors; there were hundreds of servants; if you wanted anything you nodded to Mistress Carmichael and Mistress Carmichael held up her finger and, behold, a servant appeared; the food was so good you didn't have to chew it, it slid down on its own; the dishes—of course—were gold. There were no flaws anywhere. Everything was perfect. She had finally been very sick, and she even remembered the basin in which she had vomited as a multi-coloured miracle of iridescence.

The bath, alone of all the wonders in Carmichael House, needed no embellishment, and she remembered it precisely as it was, from her first sight of it with its ominous wreath of steam to the moment when, with a hoarse gurgle, the last of its water drained out. She cherished the memory of that bath and was proud to have sat in it. She even came to regard that particular kind of bath as the hallmark of gentility, and she used it as a sort of means test. "Are they the kind of people," she would ask herself, "who'd have a bath in the house?" As she grew up baths became more common, and then she adjusted her formula and asked instead, "Are they the kind of people who would have owned a bath in the old days?" and of course the formula still worked. From the time she was five years old she was determined that some day she would have a bath of her own. It was more than an ambition: it was an implacable resolution.

When Janet Carmichael asked if there was anything she would like to take home with her, Thirza thought hard. "Maybe a puckle oats?" she said at last, angling a doubtful glance at Janet's face. "We're short on oats," she added, feeling that some explanation was needed. She could not have asked better. Manson was instructed to take her to the larder and fill her bag to overflowing, and this was duly done, Thirza watching with popping eyes as two more rabbits, a chicken, bread, flour, oatmeal, and sugar were loaded into her sack. When it was filled, even Manson could not lift it, and MacGregor had to be summoned to carry it out to the chaise.

Janet and Susan came to the back door to say good-bye. Janet stooped graciously and kissed her. "You must come back and see us again, Thirza," she said. "But next time you must not come through the fence and make Mr. Carmichael cross. You must come to the main gate and ask at the lodge for me. Will you do that?"

"Yes," said Thirza. "I want to sit in front with the man."

"No," Janet said. "You will sit inside like a lady."

"Next time you come," Susan said, "I shall show you my doll's-house, Thirza, and maybe Mamma will let us have a doll's tea-party with real China tea."

The chaise moved off, and Thirza, clasping Davy in her arms, fell back on the seat. As they reached the main gates Richard

Carmichael stepped out from the trees bordering the drive and stopped them. He spoke for a moment to MacGregor, then he opened the chaise door and looked inside, his eyes passing sternly from child to dog to bulging sack.

"You seem to have done very well for yourself," he said.

Thirza eyed him warily.

"Don't come back," he said. "You hear me? You or your dog either." He half-closed the door, and opened it again. "If you come back," he said, "I'll shoot you. Drive on, MacGregor."

Thirza was unperturbed. She did not like Richard Carmichael. She was sure he beat Mistress Carmichael, who, with her beauty, her kindness, and her refined Edinburgh accent, Thirza placed with certainty amongst the angels. She disliked Richard Carmichael exceedingly, but she did not fear him. She understood him, or thought she did. He was simply a bad man and an enemy. She could fight an outspoken enemy like Richard Carmichael, and she would. She was indifferent to his threats. She would return to the Big House whenever she felt like it.

MacGregor, the coachman, leaned back and slapped the door with his whip. "Are you quite comfortable, my lady?" he shouted.

"Yes," she said.

"That's a blessing," he said, and snorted.

Thirza put her feet triumphantly on the laden sack and sank back into the cushioned seat. This was the first time she had ever been driven in a carriage, and she liked it very much. She liked the muffled clop of the mare's hooves, the gentle rocking of the chaise, the exhilarating sense of speed as the trees slid by. She ran her finger-tips luxuriously across the surface of the upholstery. She had a feeling too vague and adult to be put into words, but nevertheless quite positive. Her feeling was that this was the natural way for Thirza Gare to travel.

She closed her eyes and smiled serenely.

CHAPTER IV

(1)

WHEN THIRZA WAS SEVEN SHE was allowed to go to school.

Andrew had been sent to Kaysie Grammar School, a slated building established by the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, and now taken over by the parish and endowed by various mortifications from the local gentry. This was a real school, presided over by a qualified dominie and having bench accommodation for close on a hundred and thirty pupils. At the Grammar School you got not only a grounding in the three Rs but also, if you paid through the nose for it, a higher education. The fees were: English reading, 3*s*. a quarter; Elocution, 3*s*. 6*d*.; Reading, Grammar, and Geography, 4*s*.; Writing, 2*s*.; Mathematics, 6*s*. 6*d*.; and Latin and Greek, 7*s*. 6*d*. Thirza was only a girl, however, and there was, therefore, never any question of giving her a higher education, or indeed any sort of education at all on the Grammar School terms.

Thirza was sent to Katie Raffan's Dame School.

Katie's school was situated in one of the closes off Kaysie Low Street. It was a thatched cottage with two rooms, or, as Katie put it, "a middlin' hoosie wi' a big but and a wee ben." The ben was sacrosanct as Katie's private quarters, and was separated from the but, or schoolroom, by a heavy curtain and by the massive blackened end of a box-bed. The bed rightly belonged in the ben, but it could not be entirely accommodated there, and so its end projected into the schoolroom, where it was put to use as a blackboard. The floors were earthen, and were covered with fir branches, brought by the scholars and renewed at least once a week. There were two windows, a remarkable feature in a room only seventeen feet by fourteen, and the walls were decorated with a map of Europe, a map of Scotland, several religious pictures, and two illuminated texts from the Scriptures. Nailed on the end of the box-bed was a large painted eye which had a devilish and omniscient look and was accompanied by the motto, THY GOD SEEST THOU.

The benches were set out in the shape of a bishop's mitre, and the children sat facing outward. In the space inside the benches—in the crown of the cap, so to speak—there was a table and a collection of stools for the older children. Katie had no table, but sat on a high stool at the fire by the handloom. From this strategic position she was able, not only to instruct her twenty or thirty pupils, but also to carry out the day's domestic duties. There was always a pot on, and twice a week she hung a girdle over the peat fire and baked oatcakes, setting up the corters to fire in a row round the ingle. When not thus engaged, and when the room was reasonably quiet, she worked industriously at her handloom.

Katie Raffan's was one of a dozen Dames' Schools in Kaysie and the Fishertown, and the reason why the Gares elected to send Thirza across the Brig to Katie's was simply because hers was the cheapest. There was no nonsense about fees and such high-falutin' tarradiddle at Katie's. You got a three-day week for a ha'penny and a five-day week for a penny, and you simply took your money along and handed it into Katie's left hand at the beginning of each week, whereupon Katie's right hand made three or five crosses against your mark in a ledger, and there you were, all set for a week's tuition. This consisted of religious instruction (mainly the Shorter Catechism), knitting, needlework, spinning, and the A, B, C. Some of the more advanced pupils were started on reading, and one or two of them, having mastered Meldrum's Primer (First Step), were directed to the Book of Proverbs. It was unfortunate that Katie owned only the first of the series of primers, for it was a fair step from *The cat sat on the mat* (with illustrations) to *Through desire a man, having separated himself, seeketh and intermeddleth with all wisdom*. There was no writing in the curriculum, for Katie herself could not write, although she maintained darkly that she could make a better hand than some, if put to it, a reference to Mistress Currie, a bitter enemy, who conducted a Dame's School only two closes away, and who prided herself so much on her penmanship course that she charged an extra penny for it.

Thirza was bitterly disappointed with school. Her special friend, Edith Gordon, had gone to Katie's the previous year, and had told Thirza, after only a day or two of school, that she had been let into the secret of the printed word and could now read like fury. When

Thirza, after a week at Katie's, taxed Edith with this misstatement, Edith said knowingly, "Ah, but you're only a three-day girl," and closed up like a clam. Thirza concluded, therefore, that only on Tuesdays and Thursdays—the days on which she was not entitled to attend—were the (pupils initiated into the mysteries of reading and writing,) and (she made strenuous efforts to gain admission on the forbidden days.)

(It was no good. Katie Raffan had an eye like a lynx for interlopers.) She was a stout, elderly woman, with jet-black hair and the (face of a dignified Roman matron.) It was because of her looks and (her imperious manner that her friends,) twenty years before, had suggested that she should start a school, and Katie, having recently lost her mother and having long since given up hope of a man, had enthusiastically agreed to the idea. She made a good teacher. She had a genuine desire to educate, or, at least, to discipline, and it was with a view to bringing education (and discipline) to the greatest possible number that she had deliberately set her fees lower than those of any other dame. (She liked to have the school teeming with pupils.) The more there were, the greater the challenge to her authority. (The greater the challenge, the more exultantly she rose to it.) She was surprised and gratified to find that Thirza liked school so much that she tried to attend every day, but rules were rules, she said, and though she wouldn't have minded having the bairn every day, she couldn't make an exception; if she did, (every penny-a-weeker would be trying her on with a bawbee.)

She turned Thirza firmly away at the door.

In time Thirza learned that the five-day scholars knew no more than she did herself, and that there (was no royal road to by-pass the alphabet.) Disillusioned, she applied herself with dogged determination to her tasks. (She could tack and hem and darn with the best,) and she would have been more than content to leave it at that, but Katie had a fondness for the needle—there was nothing like a needle, she said, to keep them quiet—and so Thirza (had to spend long hours meticulously) feather-stitching, button-holing, and even grafting. She took the family's stockings to school and darned them beautifully, and she knitted her father a black fisherman's ganzy with buttons up the side of the neck. (She spent her time usefully, but tediously.) She was frequently bored. She felt cheated with

school. She had come to be *educated*. She wanted passionately to be able to read and write.

By the time she was nine she could say the alphabet backwards and recite McLure's Primer from cover to cover. She was the best reader Katie had ever had, and was promoted to the Bible along with Jeannie Renton and Sandy Geddes, aged, respectively, twelve and thirteen. None of the scholars was allowed to put a finger on the big brass-bound Bible. When the readers decided to turn a page —a decision which could be reached only after consultation—it was the duty of the eldest to hold up his hand to attract Katie's attention, whereupon she herself would turn the page for them.

(Thirza found this group reading very irksome.) Neither Jeannie nor Sandy took the Bible seriously. (Sandy was a solid boy with a big blond head and two crowns) and he would have tried to read if Jeannie hadn't corrupted him. (Jeannie had black mischievous eyes and an uncontrollable mouth,) and there was nothing she liked better, she said, than a real good laugh. She had only to look at Sandy to laugh. It was very tiresome for Thirza. While she tried to read, Sandy and Jeannie (giggled at her side,) and often when she wanted to turn a page, they took a cruel delight in refusing to permit it.

One afternoon they told her they had decided never to turn a page again. For two days Thirza stuck it out, sitting white and tormented between them. On the third day she held up her hand for Katie. "I'm going to tell," she said.

"Tell tale tit," Sandy whispered.
"Your tongue shall be slit,
And all the doggies in the town
Shall have a little bit."

"If you say a word, Thirza Gare," Jeannie said, "I'll bash ye when we get out."

Thirza snapped her fingers.

"Thirza?" Katie said, speaking above the click and birr of her pirrin-pin. "Well, what is it?"

"Please, Katie, will you turn the page?"

"But you're not the eldest. Do you want the page turned, Sandy?"

"Nae just yet, Katie."

"Weel, are you for turnin', Jeannie?"

"No, nae me."

Katie pivoted on her stool and looked down her Roman nose at Thirza. "And, pray, how long have you been the eldest, Thirza Gare, and giving orders here?"

"Maybe I'm not the eldest," Thirza said, "but I'm the cleverest."

And to her great chagrin she burst into tears.

After that she was known for some time as *the Cleverest*. When Katie asked her a question she would say, "And what is *the Cleverest's* answer, if she so pleases?" The children made great play of it and the tale ran round the Fishertown. Alexander Gare heard it at the harbour and brought it home to his wife. "It's your duty to speak," he said, but Bathia, who had previously noted Thirza's pale cheeks, merely shook her head and decided to purge her. That night, instead of his customary reading from the Bible, Alexander Gare chose the text, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," and elaborated it into a trenchant homily.

The affair made quite a stir. Folks who had heard of the incident in the schoolroom pointed Thirza out as she passed their doors, and the mothers of other young girls criticised her sharply.

"She fairly fancies herself," they said.

Soon after this Thirza's formal education came to an end. She could then count up to twenty, repeat most of the 107 answers in the Shorter Catechism, and read four-letter words in simple Roman type with the help of her finger. She had a basic knowledge of cooking and weaving, and she was an expert, though unenthusiastic, needlewoman. She was nine years of age.

(2)

In August of that year, 1852, later to be known as the Year of the Glut, a strange thing happened. On the morning of the fourteenth, in the half light before dawn, watchers at the Fishertown observed what was thought to be an unknown phenomenon of the sea. The Bay was covered from arm to arm by what looked at first like a great white sheet three or four miles in length. Women,

opening their doors to look out to sea for their menfolk, stood for minutes in wide-mouthed amazement, and then, snatching up mutches and shawls, ran to tell the neighbours. By the time dawn broke the truth was out, and the entire Fishertown gathered on the foreshore to witness the most awe-inspiring sight in living memory.

The Bay was solid with herrings.

A great floating island of fish was drifting in with the tide. Hundreds of thousands of gannets and gulls, slithering as on slimy rocks, had taken possession of the shoal and, perched on the top layer of the dense mass of fish, fought and screamed and gorged voraciously. Whales moved freely in the deeper water. It was estimated, later, that there were upwards of eighty in the Bay. There were also great schools of porpoises, which mingled with the whales along the seaward boundary of the herring shoal, and which, stabbing the calm water like long silver darts, left it black and corrugated, as though its surface had been ruffled by a land squall.

Most of the fishermen had shot their nets some ten or fifteen miles out, and, having hauled before dawn, were now returning with moderate catches. As they came into the shoal area they reefed their sails, unstepped their masts, stowed the lot, and took to the oars. When they pulled on the oars their blades stuck as though they were rowing in heavy treacle and, feathering, they threw up dense clouds of fish. One of each crew stood right forward with a boat-hook, prodding, and with the skippers exhorting from the stern and the red-faced men at the oars faithfully polishing their ribs with their elbows, the boats edged slowly forward, boring passages as through an ice-floe.

When they had penetrated to the shore side of the shoal, the men brought their oars inboard and began to load with herrings. They scooped up the fish with wooden herring shovels, bailing basins, bottom boards, any implement they could lay hands on, and if they could find none they simply leaned over the side and gathered the fish in armfuls. As boat after boat hacked its way into the turgid stretch of water and as the watchers on the shore recognised first one and then another of their own folk, the excitement became intense. Some of the youngsters ran out along the rocks to offer their help to the inshore boats; families, clustered on the shore, clamoured shrilly for recognition from their men in the boats;

women hugged each other, screaming with delight; children too young to understand what it was all about were nevertheless beside themselves with excitement and jigged like dervishes.

It was a happy, happy day. There was wealth here for everyone. The people saw not only herrings and gannets and whales and boats and men, but riches—a full larder, a pair of winter boots for the lassie, a new glacé silk dress, even a harpsichord perhaps. They saw pieces of gold; security; plenty. Their eyes glowed with joy and fellowship. Men who were notably dour now laughed freely, and silent women chattered like jays. Some turned their shining faces to Heaven and thanked God aloud for this miracle that He had seen fit to send them, and some were so filled with happiness that they could not contain it and wept unashamedly.

Thirza was in a frenzy of impatience. Her mother had taken an unconscionable time with her dressing. She had sharply refused to allow Thirza to run on ahead, and even now, as they descended the braehead to the shore and heard the clamour and saw the boats in the treacle of herrings, Bathia still dawdled, feeling her steps with deliberation, her eyes fixed on the ground as if she cared nothing for the miracle and was interested only in descending the Slope.

"There's my father!" Thirza cried. "Mither, see my father's boat, close by the *Queenie*. There's Geordie Wood at the tiller. And my father's leaning out-bye. Mither, see him?"

"Ay," Bathia said.

"And, Mither, there's Jessie Weir and her sister. On the rocks, no less. I'm going——"

"No," Bathia said. "Stay here." But as a concession she lengthened her step, and for a few minutes walked almost briskly. Thirza, seething with frustration, skipped on ahead. She was aware her mother was falling farther and farther behind, but she had eyes only for the scene in the Bay. When her mother called out in a high-pitched voice she looked round, fretting at the delay, and saw with surprise that Bathia was sitting on the Slope, her face expressionless and her legs stretched out full length before her. Thirza scowled with astonishment and walked back.

"Now, it's a' right," Bathia said. "I'm a' right."

Thirza blinked uncomprehendingly.

"I got my trouble the day," Bathia said. "I'll jist bide here a bit and rest."

Thirza's face tightened up with vexation. She turned her head sharply away and looked towards the Bay, her lips working.

"Go then, if you must," Bathia said. "Go on, run off. I'll come after you when I've got my strength back. Away with you now."

Thirza needed no second bidding. She had gone only ten or fifteen yards, however, when her mother called again.

"Yes, Mither?"

"Dinna tell your father that you saw me sittin'."

Thirza nodded. She stood on one leg, poised to run, yet she did not run. She felt puzzled and faintly guilty. She was loath to abandon her mother.

"Be sure now," Bathia said, panting. "He wouldna like it."

"I won't tell, Mither." Thirza was worried. It was all wrong for her mother to be sitting on the road. It was wrong for anyone, even a child, to sit on the road, and it was exceedingly wrong for a prim and proper adult person like her mother. She said, "Mither, you're pechin' awful hard. Are you bad?"

"It's jist my old trouble," Bathia said. She closed her eyes and leaned back on stiff arms. Her breast rose and fell vigorously, but otherwise she showed no sign of distress. After a moment she opened her eyes and, seeing that Thirza still watched her, she contrived a kind of smile and said reassuringly, "Now off you go. I'll be right at your back."

A new clamour had broken out at the beach. As it swelled to a peak Thirza's head swung like a weather-cock. She sent a swift backward glance at her mother, and when Bathia nodded encouragingly she took to her heels and fled.

In a few minutes she had reached the beach and burrowed through to the front of the crowd. With every incoming wave the herrings were drifting nearer to the shore, and some of the more venturesome men and boys now plunged into the sea up to their waists and, gathering up armfuls of herring, emptied them into the nearest boats. Flat-bottomed cobles and old unseaworthy boats were rowed round from the harbour and hauled down the beach; planks, baths, buckets, basins, creels, cruives, boxes, even cradles—everything that would float was launched, and the Fishertown moved

out in a body to meet the host of herrings. As each boat, teeming with live fish, came inshore, fifty hands seized it, hauled it up high and dry, tilted out the catch, and re-launched it.

The problem was how to shift the herrings.

The curers were at their wits' end. They ran about the crowd issuing contradictory orders, engaging extra hands, pointing out their own boats, seizing children as messengers and sending them here, there, and everywhere. Horses began to appear, trundling carts, and lorries. All the yard gates were thrown open, and from them issued a continuous stream of barrows and hurdles and barrels. There was talk of setting up yairs to trap the herrings when the tide should recede, but there was no labour to set up the stakes, and, as the morning wore on and the immensity of the catch began to be realised, it was seen that there was no need for yairs. There were already more herrings than the curers could cope with.

Thirza assisted with the hauling of the first boats and got soaked to the skin. She trundled barrels from William Skene's, the curer's, until she dried off, and then, seeing that her father's boat, the *Rose Finlay,* was close inshore, she plunged into the water again and, floundering among the marsh of herrings, caught hold of the gunnel just as the crew leaped out.

"Alec," Geordie Wood said to her father. "Rin up to Mr. Skene's and find out fit he wants us to dae. Would we be best to launch her again or has he barrels enough for's, an' we'll fill them stannin'?"

"I'll jist give ye a hand to get her ashore first," her father said.

"Na, na, ging noo, man. This meenit. And hurry."

Her father set off.

"Alec," Geordie shouted. "Come back here. Listen, man; see if Mr. Skene's got a seine net. Speir at the foreman. And hurry man, rin, we hinna a' day to teeter about here."

Her father waded ashore and, having reached the beach, obediently ran. Thirza watched in great astonishment. As she assisted with the hauling of the boat, notching her small shoulder under the rubbing stake and pushing with all her might, she slowly digested the unpalatable fact that her father had to take orders from Geordie Wood. She had always thought of the *Rose Finlay* as her father's boat. She knew that he did not actually own the

Rose Finlay, but she had thought, if she thought about it at all, that he had an equal share and, at the very least, an equal say in all matters concerning the boat. She had thought of her father as a giant among men, and now, seeing him run like a message boy at Geordie Wood's bidding, she was shocked and dismayed. She felt that she had seen and heard something indecent, and when her father returned out of breath to say, "Lanch her again," she kept her face averted from him and busied herself with a corner of one of the nets, shaking it out vigorously. When her father spoke to her she blushed.

"Where's your mother?" he demanded.

"Oh," she said. She cast her eyes around. "I dinna ken." She remembered her mother's trouble then and felt a sudden rush of guilt. "She's somewhere about," she said lamely. "She came out with me."

"She ought to be here," Alexander said. "Tell her I'll want a piece for my dinner. There'll be no home-coming the day." He put his hand up to shelter his eyes and scanned the beach, searching for Bathia. He was justifiably annoyed. "She ought to be here," he said.

(3)

The curers had enlisted the aid of the nearby farmers, who now sent horses and carts and a variety of agricultural implements which looked, and were, oddly out of place on the sea-shore. Big black and bay Clydesdale horses with blazed foreheads and massive feathered legs clumped across the sand, dragging wagons loaded high with barrels. The more placid of the horses were led into the sea and the loading effected direct, but others, afraid of the leaping fish and their escort of squalling sea-birds, shied away and would not set hoof in water. One animal, a fine black stallion, took fright and reared up his full height, throwing his rider and breaking both shafts of the cart. Another bolted and charged the length of the beach, scattering the crowd, and leaving a wake of bouncing barrels.

A great seine net constructed of thirty drift nets, ten nets in length and three in depth, was now rowed round the seaward bight of the shoal and, fifty or sixty men on each warp, was hauled amid

great excitement from the rocks in Skerry's Cove to the east of the White Needle.

The people of Kaysie had been arriving in great numbers all forenoon. They came to watch, but few could resist the temptation to take home a frying, and every other person carried a dozen of herring threaded on to a length of sailmaker's twine. Some of the poorer people brought blankets sewn together to form a net. They spread these home-made nets on the sand, stood on the corners to anchor them, and left the tide to do the rest. In normal times the people of the Fishertown would have resented this intrusion of the Kaysie townfolks, but this was a day on which Christian feeling ran high, and it was possible, temporarily, to consider even a Kaysie man as a brother. In any case, there were so many herrings that all were welcome to a share. The fishers nodded to the strangers and even replied cordially, if somewhat warily, when spoken to. They said, "Ay, it's a great day right enough."

About noon Thirza, riding with Jessie Flett on a lorry bound for Skene's yard, was accosted by two women, on their way to the beach with dinner pails for their men. "How's your mither, Thirza?" one of them asked. "Better, I hope."

"What's wrang wi' my mither?" Thirza cried. She jumped down off the lorry. "What is it? Is my mither sick?"

The women looked at each other. After all, it might not be true. It was only hearsay.

"Tell me," Thirza said.

"We heard she had the doctor."

Thirza's heart turned over. Without a word she took to her heels and headed for home. *The doctor!* Fear drove her at breakneck speed. At the end of the Shore her stride broke suddenly and she slithered to a halt. She ought to tell her father. She looked round at the beach and whimpered in a fury of impotence, and then, shaken by a new gust of fear, she rejected the idea of returning for her father and tore on up the Slope.

When she reached the house she was quite out of breath. She was also very frightened. She put a hand on the door-jamb and leaned for a moment, looking with glazed eyes at the closed door, and then she took a long uncertain breath and went in.

There was a woman sitting in her mother's basket chair under

the window, but it wasn't her mother. It was old Meg Airlie, from the next house but one. She was sitting quietly in the chair, knitting, and when Thirza opened the door she merely glanced up incuriously and continued with her knitting. Thirza took a step into the room and looked at the bed. Her mother was in the bed. She could see her mother's face, and she closed her eyes with relief because she knew that, doctor or no doctor, her mother was not yet dead. Her head was uncovered.

"She's sleepin'," Meg said.

"I'm nothing of the sort," her mother said.

Thirza's heart leapt with gladness. She advanced slowly and stood looking at her mother, whose face, on the pillow of the big box-bed, was on a level with her own. Bathia was pale, but otherwise she looked much the same as usual. Thirza cleared her throat.

"You had the doctor, Mither?"

"Ay. I had the doctor."

"She hisna to speak," Meg said.

"I'll speak an I think fit, and I do," her mother said. "What's doin' down by? Are they aye takin' fish?"

"Ay, they're catchin' a lot o' fish, Mither."

"And your father?"

"He's doin' brawly. What did the doctor say, Mither?"

"Very little."

"He said she had to lie in her bed," old Meg said. "She has to lie quiet and nae talk, and she's to bide there till he bades her rise, and that winna be for a lang, lang time if ye ask me." And she shook her head and clicked her needles dramatically. "Maybe never."

Bathia turned her face to the wall.

"Have you spoken with your father?" she asked.

"Ay, Mither."

"Did he speir where I was?"

"Ay, he wanted to know," she said, remembering. "He said to tell you he'll need a piece for his dinner."

"I thought o' that. Meg's got it ready. There's enough for you too."

Thirza stood looking at the back of her mother's head. She did not know what to say. She felt that there was something that ought

to be said, but she could not think what. She could not think at all. She had had too much emotion, too much excitement, and now she was drained of all feeling and her mind was blank, and all she could do was stand there dumbly and stare at the back of her mother's head.

After a little she looked at Meg, but the old woman ignored her. She had eyes only for her knitting, although from time to time she pursed her lips and shook her head. Thirza made a noise in her throat and glanced expectantly at both women, but neither spoke, and she began to feel afraid again. The silence stifled her. Her legs became stiff and uncomfortable, and fear solidified in her stomach. "What'll I do?" she said at last.

"Take your father's dinner," Bathia said. She turned, and Thirza saw then that her eyes were unnaturally bright. The pupils were very large, and glowed with an odd brown brilliance; they looked like yellow eyes. "I thought you'd gone," she said. "Take him his dinner. It's on the ingle."

Thirza moved immediately.

"And tell him about me," Bathia said. She thought noticeably. "You better tell him," she said, "for fear he hears and gets alarmed."

Meg sniffed.

"And, Thirza, tell him it wisna me got the doctor in. Be sure now. It wisna me. There was nae need o' the doctor, for it's jist my trouble. But there's some as canna mind their ain business, and they got the doctor when they found me fainted."

"At death's ain door," Meg said.

"I canna shift her," Bathia said. "The aul' crone. She jist sits there like a black craw an' knits. You tell your father what I telt you. There was nae need o' the doctor. Now go."

Her voice had dwindled to a whisper.

Thirza stared at her in alarm. She saw that her mother was in pain, and she could not take her eyes from the thin, contorted face. The spasm passed, and Bathia sank more deeply into the pillow.

"Go," she said.

"I should bide, Mither."

"Go," she said, imperious and hostile.

Thirza picked up the dinner pail and ran.

(4)

At the junction of the Slope and the Shore the road rose to form a mound of high ground from which one had an excellent view of the beach. There was a carriage drawn up on this mound, and as Thirza came alongside it a voice said, "Why, it's that little girl, what's her name, the fisher-girl!" And Thirza, looking up at the open window, saw the smiling faces of Janet and Susan Carmichael.

"It's Thirza, Mamma," Susan said. "Thirza Gare."

"Why, of course. Thirza. Hullo, Thirza. What a beautiful name. I wonder where you got it. Come here, Thirza, you naughty girl; I thought you were to come back and see us. Susan was very disappointed. Weren't you, Susan? Say hullo to Thirza, dear."

"Hullo, Thirza," Susan said.

"I was disappointed too," Janet said, pouting, "because I thought you liked us; but I suppose you have other friends and never even thought of us again. Why, child, you're very pale. Is something wrong? Don't you think she looks pale, Susan? MacGregor, do stop fidgeting. Every time you fidget the springs squeak and it is very provoking. It is also bad for Susan's nerves."

"I don't mind, Mamma."

"Of course you mind, Susan. MacGregor, you must lubricate these springs the moment we return to Carmichael House. And now, Thirza, what have you to say for yourself? Indeed you've grown, child. I do declare you'd be quite a beauty if you had a little more colour in your cheeks." She stole a fond but shrewd glance at her daughter and, reassured that Thirza could never match Susan in either delicacy or regularity of features, prattled gaily on. "I think I would be inclined to put your hair in braids, looped up. Would that not be nice, Susan? Like Cousin Juliet Arnott's, only with a little more finesse perhaps. It wouldn't do at all for you, Susan"—and she gently tweaked a blonde ringlet—"because you're like your mother; she is like me, isn't she, Thirza? Everybody says she is, but that isn't what I mean, Susan dear; I mean, you suit a soft and feminine kind of style, just like me, whereas a dark person, like Thirza, tends to be better set off with quite a severe style of hairdressing. And I think I would have you,"

she said, eying Thirza speculatively, "in reds and greens. Even violets. What is it, Susan?"

Susan whispered with animation.

"Yes, of course I remember, Susan. It was really very naughty of you not to come back, Thirza, because after you had gone we looked out some clothes for you. Why didn't you come back, dear? Was it because you didn't like us? I think I know. Gracious, what an amusing thought! It was because of the bath, wasn't it?"

Thirza shook her head. In her dreams—and, sleeping and awake, she had dreamed often of the Carmichaels—she was on terms of delightful intimacy with Janet Carmichael. She would put up her hand and run it in a gentle caress along Janet's smooth cheek, and she would sometimes even snuggle into Janet's arms and, smiling luxuriously, allow herself to be cuddled and cosseted like a baby. She had thought of Janet Carmichael with painful adoration almost every day since their meeting at Carmichael House, and she had built up a wonderful dream relationship between Janet and herself, in which she, Thirza, spoke a great deal, and, confident of loving and sympathetic attention, bared her heart and unreservedly told her secrets and her troubles. That was the dream. In fact, she stood awed and tongue-tied, unable even to raise her eyes to Janet's face.

"I think you didn't like the bath and that was why you didn't come back again," Janet said. "Come now, admit it, that was why, wasn't it, Thirza? But you should have realised that we only bathed you for your own good. Susan has a bath once a week, haven't you, Susan?"

"Yes, and Mamma has one nearly every day."

"Hush, dear, not in front of MacGregor. Susan," she said to Thirza, "is so very indiscreet. You had a dog, had you not, Thirza? I'm certain you had a dog. What sort of a dog was it?"

"A mongrel, Mamma," Susan said. "A little black and white mongrel."

"Oh yes, and you had a quaint name for him."

"Davy," Susan said.

"Susan remembers everything," Janet said, pleased. "And where's Davy to-day, Thirza? On the beach, helping, I suppose?" She laughed delightedly. "And you are going there too, are you not? It has been a great day for everybody, and Mr. Robertson, the

curer, tells me that all you fisher people are getting quite rich. And Mr. Carmichael has made a fortune, I hear. Mr. Robertson has been telling me about it. Mr. Carmichael never tells me anything. He thinks I haven't a head for business, and he's quite right of course, I get so bored when men talk about their deals, but Mr. Robertson made it all perfectly clear, and I must say I think Mr. Carmichael might have told me about it, because it was really a very interesting transaction and quite simple to understand. How many barrels was it, Susan, three thousand?"

"Yes, Mamma."

"I knew it was something like that. Three thousand is really a prodigious number of barrels, don't you think, Thirza? Well, Mr. Carmichael bought these barrels twelve months ago, when somebody's curing yard closed down—pray don't tell me, Susan, it is simply of no consequence whose yard it was, because, whoever he was, he's dead now, and that's how your father came to get the barrels in the first place—he bought them for only a few coppers, a handful of silver, Mr. Robertson said, because they were old barrels, you see, and stored them. I don't remember where he stored them, and it doesn't really signify, in one of the warehouses I suppose. Anyway, he stored them because he knew that some day there was going to be a desperate need for barrels—I don't really see how he could have known that, but Mr. Robertson says he did, and therefore I expect he did because he is very astute, he always has been, exceptionally astute, I might say—and to-day, of course, there was a dreadful shortage of barrels; there wasn't a barrel to be had except those the coopers were busy making, and so Mr. Carmichael offered his barrels for sale, and do you know how much money he got for them, Thirza—for every one of these three thousand barrels? Five shillings. I think that was exceedingly clever of him, don't you?"

"I'm sure, Mamma," Susan said, "that Thirza doesn't understand such matters."

"Nonsense," Janet said sharply. "An affair of this sort is so simple that even a *child* could understand it. I'm sure you understand perfectly, don't you, Thirza?"

Thirza raised her eyes by degrees and said in a rush, "I liked the bath."

"You did! You funny child; well, then, of course you must come

and have another. Only this time we shall make sure you come. We shall fix an exact date, shall we say Saturday? Would you like that, Susan? Susan is quite lonely, you know."

"Oh yes, Mamma."

"Saturday then, Thirza. At two-thirty. We'll be expecting you."

Thirza shook her head.

"Doesn't Saturday suit you? Some other day, then. Sunday perhaps?"

"No," Thirza said. "I canna come."

"Why not? Don't you want to? Do you not like us; is that it, Thirza?"

Thirza shook her head violently.

"What is it, then? Come, child, tell me. I insist that you tell me."

"My mither winna let me," Thirza said reluctantly.

"But why on earth not?"

"She says," Thirza said, head down. "Says it's like begging."

"But how ridiculous! How utterly absurd! Susan, did you ever hear such nonsense? Of course you must come. I shall go and see your mother myself."

"You canna," Thirza said. "She's bedded."

"Bedded!"

"She means," MacGregor said, sitting stiffly in order not to creak the springs and moving only his head, "that her mother is poorly, ma'am."

"Sick," Janet said. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. What is the matter, Thirza?"

"I dinna ken."

"What does the doctor say?"

"Very little," Thirza said, repeating her mother's words. "My mither says the doctor disna ken himsel'."

Janet Carmichael was troubled by the expression on the child's face. "If the doctor doesn't know, you ought to have a specialist," she said. She thought, frowning. "My own doctor from Aberdeen is a very special doctor with Infirmary experience. He comes to examine me once a month—I'm delicate, you see—and next time he comes I shall get him to visit your mother. Yes," she said. She was like a child in her enthusiasm, and she smiled happily now, delighted to have solved a problem. "That's the very solution. How

fortunate that I thought of it! If anyone can find a cure Doctor Young will. He's a wonderful doctor. He once attended the Queen. I shall have Doctor Young call to see your mother at the very earliest opportunity, Thirza. What is the address?"

Thirza didn't understand.

"Where do you live, dear?"

Thirza tried to explain. "Up," she said, "and along." She pointed, jerking her wrist. "And then down. And up again."

"But what is the name of the street?"

The street had no name.

"MacGregor knows," Susan said, "because MacGregor took her home last time and carried the sack for her."

"MacGregor," Janet said. "Do you know where this young lady lives?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh well," Janet said, "it's all resolved. You will drive the doctor, MacGregor. There now, you are not to worry any more, Thirza. Doctor Young personally bathed and bandaged our Gracious Queen's ankle, and she paid him with her own hands, although he wished no reward of course, and, do *you* know, he has one of the sovereigns to this day! He has it mounted on his watch-chain. He is truly a wonderful man. He has done me so much good, and he has practically cured Susan's nerves, hasn't he, darling? So you see, Thirza, you have nothing to worry about. There now, child, you are looking better already. Come, let us have a smile before we go. Isn't Thirza so much prettier when she smiles, Susan? Gracious, consider the time! We shall be late for the meeting with your father. MacGregor, we shall go now. And Thirza, after your mother is better, you will come and see us, won't you? We shall arrange it. Say good-bye to Thirza, Susan. Good-bye, good-bye, dear."

The carriage moved off, and Thirza, elated, bounded over the sea-wall and raced down over the rounded stones to the sand. Her mother was to have a doctor who came all the way from Aberdeen and who had attended the Queen. Who could ask for more? And who, aged nine, listening to Janet Carmichael, could doubt that her mother was now as good as cured?

The tide was just beginning to recede and the wet sand was

covered with stranded fish. Many of the Kaysie people who had not been willing to venture even ankle deep into the sea now ran along the beach, gathering herrings, while others, clambering warily along the rocks, shouted with delight as they came upon great shoals of fish trapped in clefts and ledges. Thirza, trampling deliberately on herrings, skipped along the beach, close to the water's edge. When she saw her father standing knee-deep in the sea at the bow of the *Rose Finlay,* she raised the dinner pail and waved to him, and he spoke to Geordie Wood and trudged heavily ashore.

"Where's your mother?" he said, drawing his forearm wearily across his brow.

She told him.

He did not let her finish. He did not even wait for the news about Mistress Carmichael's doctor. The moment he heard that Bathia was in bed he swung away from Thirza without a word, and ran.

Thirza ran after him. "Your dinner, Father!" she shouted. "You didna get your piece."

He paid no attention, and, seeing that the chase was hopeless, she gave up and stopped. She swung the dinner pail irritably. She was vexed with her father. He ought to have listened to what she had to say, and he ought to have taken his dinner. This was the second time she had watched him run to-day and she did not approve of it. She felt that everyone was looking at him, that he was making a public exhibition of himself. If only he had listened to what she had to say he would have known that there was no need to run. It was humiliating to have a father who ran so easily.

She watched with furrowed brows until he turned the corner of the Slope, and then she opened the pail and selected the smaller of the "pieces." Munching, she walked slowly homewards. Why couldn't he have waited till she told him about the Queen's doctor? He would have known then that there was nothing to worry about. When she reached the road she spat out a crust, blinked rapidly, and lengthened her stride. She had just had a disturbing thought. The thought was: *Even queens die.*

CHAPTER V

(1)

AT FIRST THE HOUSE SEEMED very strange with her mother in bed, but in less than a week a new routine had been established, and it then seemed to Thirza, as she sat knitting of an evening in the ingle-nook, that this state of affairs had always existed, and that there had never been a time in her life when she had not been the woman of the house.

She rose at dawn and scrubbed with yesterday's water until it was time to prepare the breakfast, and then she went down to the Well and drew two pails of water. She did not play around like the other children at the Well. She stood soberly in the queue and soberly drew her water, judging to a nicety how much she could carry in each bucket. The women asked about her mother, and she replied in adult fashion saying, "She had a good night," or, "Only fair to middlin' the day."

Having returned with the water, she would put on the porridge and make her mother's gruel. She had to pay special attention to this, because Bathia did not like gruel, and if it was not exactly to her taste she would not take it. Thirza therefore had to be very careful to press all the flour from the meal and to stir religiously during every one of the twenty minutes that the pot was on the fire. While her mother supped her gruel she went to the door and looked out to the Bay, as Bathia had always been accustomed to do, to see the position of the herring fleet. She ate her porridge, washed the dishes, scrubbed the table, sanded and brushed the floor, cleaned the window—a task which had to be done every day because of the smoke from the peats—and then, with her mother watching every move, advising, cautioning, sometimes scolding, she would bank the fire and begin to prepare the midday meal.

Her father came home about noon. Occasionally, he might mend one of his nets, but usually he was content to sit empty-handed in the rocker chair. He had been up most of the night. He ate his

dinner and took off his shoes and sat relaxed by the fire. Sometimes he dosed. When he slept her mother, watching bright-eyed from the bed, would scold Thirza for the slightest sound.

Thirza did her washing in the afternoon. Her mother was very particular about the washing. Everything had to be soaked the day before. The rinsing water had to be just the right temperature. There had to be salt in this and soda in that. If you were doing her red flannel nightgown, you had to remember to put a little vitriol into the last rinsing water. When you made your starch you had to add only one drop from the turpy bottle, otherwise your linen would get scorched, and then of course you had to wait for a very bright sun to take out the stain.

Her father had invariably brought home fish, and they had this for tea. There was a surprising number of ways in which to ring the changes in your herring. You could roast it, boil it, stew it, fry it, broil it, bake it, pot it, and even make a broth of it. Thirza became very proficient with the herring.

In the early evening her father left for the harbour, and Thirza swept and cleaned and prepared her mother's prescribed Carageen Moss. She then tackled the ironing. Bathia watched like a hawk. She was never satisfied. When the iron was cool she said it would leave brown marks. When it was hot she said that it was too hot. It was always with a sigh of relief that Thirza finally cleaned and stowed the irons. She had now only to give her mother a hot sand-bag and change the bowl of water under the bed, and the rest of the evening was her own. She would sit for half an hour darning or knitting under the cruisie lamp at the ingle-nook, then her mother would stir herself and say, "It's time you were in bed, Thirza," and another day would come to an end.

At first Thirza thought a great deal about the Queen's doctor. She expected him every day. When she woke she thought of him immediately, and she cleaned and polished with a sense of urgency, feeling that she had to have the house nice for him. But as the days passed and her mother seemed to get no worse, she thought less and less about the great doctor, and finally all but forgot him.

Old Dr. Grant came from Kaysie once a week.

Although in his seventies Dr. Grant was still a handsome man and caused a flutter in the hearts of many of his female patients.

He was over six feet in height and straight as a guardsman. His hair still grew in black. He had found it advisable for reasons of hygiene to trim his beard into a neat V, but he was vain of his moustaches and let them riot, and this combination of dapper chin and luxuriant upper lip gave him an air which some thought very gallant. Others, including Thirza, thought him a sinister-looking man. His eyes were dark brown and lively and he had a deep musical voice. Normally he was slow and deliberate in his movements, and he pontificated rather than spoke. But when the need arose he could be surprisingly active and, given a recalcitrant patient, he could shout and curse like the next man.

He was a dab hand at surgery. There was nothing he liked better than a good amputation, and he was noted for his legs. The fisher-children said he would take off your leg as soon as look at you, and certainly there was an undue number of one-legged persons in the district. He did not like to be reminded of this. At a medical conference in Banff a colleague once made a jocular reference to the pegs o' Kaysie. "Ay," Dr. Grant said. "We have pegs in Kaysie, sir, where you have cairns in Banff." He was a great advocate of leeches and bred his own. For some obscure reason he believed himself to be noted for his diagnoses, and he took a great deal of trouble over them. He would not commit himself until he had cogitated over a case for several days, and then, having made up his mind, there was no power on earth could change it: the ailment was identified once and for all and the treatment irrevocably fixed. He stood staunchly by his mistakes. If he once maintained that a stomach ulcer was a colic he maintained it to the bitter end. He was never wrong. He had no truck with second opinions or post-mortems. He did not consult his books. He had no means of knowing when he made mistakes and therefore could not learn from them. As he grew old he came to believe that he was infallible. He regretted the death of a patient, but he never questioned his own responsibility. He had always the comforting knowledge that he had done his best; he said piously that no man could do more.

He came to see Bathia on Tuesday mornings. He came on horseback, riding his big hunter where no horse had been before, up the Slope and along the ash path right to the door.

Bathia dreaded these visits. She was always ill with worry before

the doctor came, and when he sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand in his to feel her pulse, her colour rose and she compressed her lips into a tight, disapproving line. When he asked questions she answered shortly and uninformatively. She had no intention of helping him. She hadn't asked for him, didn't want him. She had no time for the man, and she saw no reason to assist him in his duties. He was the doctor. It was his job to know what was wrong. If he didn't, let him say so like a man, and go. She was very scornful of his abilities. "When he first came he didna even ken where the pain was," she said. She made no secret of her contempt. She thought him a fool; nevertheless, she obeyed his orders and took his medicines. "Nae doot we'll be payin' for them," she said.

The first time the doctor came, Alexander Gare stayed at home from the fishing to see him. Thirza was sent out "to mind the horse," a poor pretext in view of their relative sizes and one which did not deceive her. She inspected the animal from a safe distance and loitered near the door to listen. She heard the great boom of the doctor's voice, but was unable to make out what he said. When the doctor left her father walked with him to his horse.

"Is there naething mair can be done?" her father asked. "Naething, sir?"

"You can pray," the doctor said, and hoisted himself up into the saddle and put his heels to the hunter's flanks.

(2)

The pain in Bathia's stomach had now settled to a dull, steady ache. During the first week or two she expected each day that the next day would see her on her feet again and once or twice she insisted on getting up. But the effort of putting on her clothes and hobbling across the room was too much for her. She found that all she was able to do was sit at the fireside, and even this tired her. Soon she gave up all attempts to get out of bed, and she ceased to speak about getting better. In the early stages of her illness it had seemed that food dulled the pain, and she had eaten heartily. Now, she lost appetite. She had pains when eating and excreting, and she became afraid of her food. She grew thinner.

Thirza, seeing her mother every day and indeed almost every

minute of every day, failed to notice that she was losing weight. She did observe a change, however. She noted that her mother was paying less and less attention to what was going on around her. She no longer supervised Thirza's work. She dosed for long periods during the day and, when awake, would lie staring at the ceiling. She spoke often of Andrew. "Things would be different," she said over and over again, "if only Andra was here." When she spoke of Andrew she spoke to herself. If Thirza interjected as much as a Yes or a No, Bathia would abruptly cease to speak and glance sharply at her, and Thirza soon learned that she was not expected to interrupt. Sometimes she did not even listen. She was interested in all her mother's memories of Andrew, but she no longer thought of him as one of the family. She had forgotten what he looked like. He was as remote as a character in the Bible.

One evening Bathia told Thirza the real cause of her trouble. "It's my womb," she said. "I've aye been bothered wi' it, and it's been very bad since you were born. The doctor says it's the stomach, but I ken better. It's the womb. I had five miscarriages before you were born, an' I'd near given up hope when you took a grip. I had a sair time wi' you, God knows, and I've never been right since."

Thirza grew very white. She stared at her mother with large, frightened eyes.

"Ay," Bathia said. "It was carrying you that finished me."

"But it's nae my blame, is't, Mither?"

"No," Bathia said. "There's naebody blamin' ye."

Alexander Gare suggested that Mairget should be brought home from Banff, but Bathia would not hear of it. "She might lose her fine job," she said. "Na, na, I'll still be abune the ground next summer, an' I'll see her then." The truth was, she did not wish to see anyone. She wanted only to be left in peace. She could not be bothered with people, even her own. Thirza had strict injunctions to allow no one to set foot inside the door, and when neighbours called to ask for her mother, it was her duty to turn them politely but firmly away.

There was one person, however, whom Thirza could not prevent from entering, and this was Bathia's cousin, Jamaima. Jamaima was married to a Kaysie wheelwright, and, having gone up in the world, visited the Fishertown only on auspicious occasions. In the

past it had taken a birth or a christening to prise Jamaima out of her couthy wee Kaysie house. She was a fat and lordly-looking woman, and she dressed, as far as her means would allow it, in the height of fashion. She bowled along like a ship of the line in full sail in monstrous hats and voluminous skirts—her daughter Jane once told Thirza that she wore eight petticoats on a Sunday—and on the few occasions that she penetrated into the Fishertown she excited much interest and left a trail of ribald comments in her wake.

One Saturday afternoon early in September, Thirza, emptying slops into the dump, perceived a vast and gaudy shape at the foot of the Slope, and, recognising it immediately, raced home with the news that Cousin Jamaima was on her way.

Bathia roused herself from a reverie and looked sharply at her husband, who was trimming a wick at the fireside. "Hear that, Alec?"

"You'll nae stop *her* from comin' in," he said.

"Thirza," Bathia said. "Go an' meet her. Keep her away as long as you can. She's come to see me on my death-bed, but she'll nae have that satisfaction. Alec, give me a hand."

"Now, Mither," Alexander-said.

"Haud your tongue and pass me my skirt. And hurry, Thirza!"

When Cousin Jamaima arrived, and, reefing her skirts, sidled through the door, Bathia was ensconced in the basket-chair by the fire. She raised her head slowly, blinking as if in surprise, and laid her knitting in her lap. "Well, Jamaima," she said. "And what brings you out the day in all your finery?"

Jamaima lowered herself on to the bench and, blowing like a grampus, adjusted the layers of her face to conceal her disappointment. "I thocht you was ill," she said. She cast an astute glance at the bed, and, seeing that it was smooth and unruffled, sighed openly.

"No matter, the outing will do me good. I heard you was deein', Bathia. My, it's hot. Could I have a suppy watter, do you think?"

"Dip her a ladle, Thirza," Bathia said. She looked at her cousin critically. "You're fatter than ever, Jamaima. I'm thinkin' you're sair pit till't in weather like this."

"Oh, I manage, I manage," Jamaima said heavily.

She stayed a full hour, tilting vigorously, but Bathia, armed with

all her old asperity, gave as good as she got. When at last Jamaima retired, ruffled and discomfited, Bathia permitted herself her first genuine smile for weeks.

"I feel a lot better," she said. She had a touch of colour in her cheeks and her eyes were bright. When they put her back to bed she insisted on being propped up. She seemed anxious to talk. "Fancy!" she said. "Fancy her comin' all that way jist to see me on my death-bed!" She was engrossed with the memory of Jamaima's visit and she kept on about it. "I declare, she's as bad as Aul' Meg, but I sent her hame wi' a flea in her lug. Did I not, Alec?"

"You certainly did, Mither."

Thirza was very pleased. As she moved about the room preparing the evening meal, she hummed snatches of a hymn tune and glanced with satisfaction at her mother. Bathia had not been so spry for a long time. It seemed that Cousin Jamaima's visit had done her a power of good.

After supper Bathia relapsed into her customary silence, however, and about nine o'clock Thirza noticed that she was very pale.

"Have you a pain, Mither?" she asked.

"Ay."

"Will I wake my father?"

Alexander was dosing by the fire.

"No. Let him be."

Thirza heated the sand-bag and applied it to her mother's stomach. It brought no relief. Bathia said the pain was different, it was going in circles. When it came to the centre it stabbed, and each time it stabbed her body arched like a bow, she dug her elbows into the bed and threw back her head, her throat up, her eyes screwed tight, and her teeth showing.

Thirza watched, fascinated, absorbing every detail, grinding her own teeth as each paroxysm reached its climax.

"It'll get better," Bathia said, panting heavily.

But it didn't.

It got worse.

Each cycle of pain appeared to be severer than the one before. Sweat broke out on Bathia's brow, and unexpectedly she screamed —a short, sharp scream which tightened every muscle in Thirza's

body and which ricochetted round the room, evoking echoing splinters of sound from the walls.

Alexander Gare woke with a start and came across to the bedside.

The pain receded to an outer circle, and Bathia opened her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said.

"It's a' right," Alexander said. "It's a' right, lass."

"It's nae a' right," she said savagely, arching up again. "Haud your tongue, man."

"The hot bag?" Alexander said to Thirza.

"She has it, Father."

Her mother screamed again. The cycle was shorter now and the pain sharper. No sooner had her body sunk relaxed into the bed than it rose again, taut and vibrant. It was terrible to watch.

"Try her wi' soda," Alexander said.

Thirza mixed up a little baking soda in sour milk. It had sometimes helped. But now Bathia could not or would not take it. Her screams grew louder and more animal in their intensity, and in the intervals between them she moaned constantly in a series of pitiful "Ah-h-hs."

Thirza and her father made halting movements as if to help, but there was nothing at all they could do, and they knew it. They could only stand and watch.

"I could run for the doctor," Thirza said at last, her voice high-pitched and unfamiliar. She clutched at him. "Father! Couldn't I?"

"Eh?"

She waited till a new spasm had passed.

"The doctor, Father!"

"Ay," Alexander said, relieved. "Ay, that's it. Get the doctor." He leaned over the bed. "She's off to get the doctor, Bathia."

Bathia opened her eyes, and they both saw her nod. They glanced at each other fearfully. She actually *wanted* the doctor.

"Dear God," Alexander said. He began to shout. "Hurry, Thirza. Flee! Get the doctor, girl!"

(3)

The doctor lived in a large walled-in house at the end of Kaysie Nethergate. It was one of the oldest houses in the district, and at

one time it had been separated from the town by two or three acres of green land. These had been built over during the last hundred years, and now the doctor's house stood in the centre of a poor district, surrounded by dilapidated cottages and small shops, and isolated only by its high garden walls. Thirza had never been to the house before and she ran the length of two walls before finding the gate. She had been running ever since she left home, her legs were very heavy, and she had a stitch in her left side. She had to lean for a moment against the door before she found the strength to reach up to the high bell-pull. She heard the bell jangle, and whenever the clapper slackened its beat she pulled again, impatiently. In a few minutes the house was filled with the metallic clanging of the bell.

An old woman with a grey mutch over her head opened the door and said, "Doctor's out." This was Mrs. Marshall, the doctor's housekeeper, a gnarled and dirty old woman, bent with rheumatism and further disfigured by an unsightly growth of hair on upper lip and chin. She was short-sighted and deaf, and as she spoke she worked her eyebrows and at the same time cupped her hand to her ear to catch the reply. "Doctor's out," she said, shouting. "In the country."

Thirza's heart sank.

"When will he be back?"

"What's 'at?"

"When will he be back, missus?"

"I dinna ken. Late. What was it you wanted?"

Thirza told her that her mother was ill. She told her in detail, shouting in a loud hoarse voice and stopping between words to sob for breath. When she had finished she was not sure how much the old woman had understood and so she told her all over again. She repeated her mother's name three times. "Bathia Gare of the Fishertown," she said. "Are you sure you'll mind?"

"Oh, I'll mind," the housekeeper said. "I'll tell him when he comes in, but I'm nae sayin' he'll come the nicht. He has to get his sleep some time."

"He's got to come," Thirza said. She saw her mother's face and heard her screams, and, although she would have sworn that she

wasn't crying, tears began to stream down her cheeks. "He's got to, missus. It's serious."

"It's aye serious," the housekeeper said. "But it's a' right, lassie! Dinna fash. I'll tell him."

The door closed and Thirza sat down on the steps and whimpered. She did not cry. She would not cry. She nibbled at her nails and thought hard. She felt there must be something else to be done, but she could not think what it was. She could not think past the fact that the doctor was out in the country and would not be back till late. After a little she got up and set out for home again. Her legs felt soft and flabby and they could not have run if she had asked them to. She walked very slowly.

When she reached the Brig she leaned over the parapet and looked down at the brown water of the Lynn. The river was at its widest as it flowed through the central arches. In parts it was barely deep enough to cover the bottom stones, and all through the year you might see salmon darting over the stones at the start of their run up-river. In the summer months, when the grilse were migrating, you might sometimes see shoals, hundreds strong, climbing each other's backs in the shallows, leaping the boulders like frogs, and then of course sightseers crowded the Brig, and the poachers and the water bailiffs worked overtime at nights.

Thirza stared down at the shallow water and searched without interest for salmon swirls. She did not want to go home. When she opened the door her father would look at her eagerly and her mother would turn her head on the pillow and stare at her with those desperate, burning eyes. They depended on her to bring the doctor.

She couldn't disappoint them. She couldn't, she wouldn't go home without him.

It was then that she thought for the first time in weeks of Janet Carmichael and Janet Carmichael's doctor, and before the thought had taken real shape in her mind she had swung off the parapet and begun to trot stiffly along the road that led up-river away from the Fishertown. When she had driven in luxury along this same road the journey from Carmichael House to the Brig had taken only a matter of minutes. Now, on foot, it took what seemed an interminable time.

It was more than an hour later when she reached the Lodge at the big wrought-iron gates and hammered imperiously on the door.

The young man who answered her knock scratched his beardless chin when she told him that she must see Mistress Carmichael.

"I ken I dinna look important enough," Thirza said. "But I jist *have* to see her."

"Mary," the man said, raising his voice. "Come here."

His wife came to the door, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Listen," he said.

She listened attentively; shook her head.

"You see," she said to Thirza, "it's like this. There's a ball up at the hoose the nicht. I fear ye canna win up among a' they swell gentry."

"I can," Thirza said doggedly. "I must."

They did not know what to do. "You could ging up to the hoose, Tam, and speir are we to let her in," the young woman said, but the man was reluctant. It was half a mile to the house. They were still debating the point when a carriage and pair, driven by a top-hatted coachman and occupied by a lady and gentleman of fashion, drew up at the gates. The man Tom ran for his cap and jacket, unlocked the gates and threw them open.

The carriage got under-way, and as it did so Thirza, acting on impulse, darted forward and caught hold of the elliptic spring at the rear of the off-side wheel. With a great effort she thrust her legs up and found a foothold on the axle and, clinging precariously, was swept up the drive.

Behind, she heard the woman call to her husband. The man also shouted and, after a moment's hesitation, began to run after the carriage.

At the first bend in the drive Thirza dropped off her perch and scuttled into the shrubbery. The man Tom passed within a few feet of her, running at full tilt, and disappeared up the drive. Thirza lay hidden until she had recovered her breath, and then, having judged the position of the house, set out across the woodland.

Carmichael House was a blaze of light. The windows on the ground-floor were all illuminated and threw out a great rectangle of light carpeting the lawn. When Thirza reached the house there

was no one about—the carriage had already disgorged its occupants and the gate-keeper was not to be seen—and so she ran boldly across the lighted lawn and knocked on the door.

The ballroom was on the ground-floor and the windows were open. She heard music and the casual chatter of voices. She knocked again, louder. She knocked several times, but no one came. At last she tried the door, found it open, and walked into the hall.

The hall was deserted.

She stood at the open fireplace under a gleaming canopy of brasses, staring first at one and then at another of the doors that surrounded the hall. She had no idea what to do, and she felt very small and helpless.

Voices reached her from above, and she fixed her eyes hopefully on the big Jacobean staircase. A group of ladies, in jewelled and brocaded gowns, was descending the stairs. They carried programmes and fans. Alas, Janet Carmichael was not among them. As they saw Thirza their conversation dwindled away and they stared curiously. They swept down the staircase and turned right, towards the music. The last lady paused at the foot of the stairs as if to speak. When she put up her *lorgnette* Thirza gave her a small uncertain smile, but the lady merely moistened her lips, said, "How odd," and hurried on.

Thirza did not know what to do. She sent out a series of despairing glances. The ladies had vanished behind a door. There was no one in sight. It was more than flesh and blood could bear to have come so far and now to fail. Thirza's face crumbled. As a last desperate resort she began to shout.

"Mistress Carmichael! Mistress Carmichael!"

The sound of her voice gave her courage. She shouted louder. She shouted very loud indeed, over and over and over again. Echoes bounced back along the parquet floors of the corridors. The end of each shout overlapped the beginning of the next, and her ears were bombarded with a continuous roll of sound.

She became aware that the orchestra had stopped.

"Mistress Carmichael—Michael—Mistress Carmichael!"

There was a stir in all sections of the house. Footsteps from the ballroom. A man's voice on the landing. A brisk patter of running feet from the passage beyond the stairs. Thirza pirouetted, listening.

She was afraid now. She was afraid of the surge of activity that she had set in motion, and she was tempted to flee before these converging waves engulfed her. But she had come to see Mistress Carmichael, and see her she would. She dug her bare feet into the rug and stood waiting.

A man-servant swooped on her, seized her arm and, without a word, dragged her to the passage beyond the stairs. There, a bevy of servants closed in on her. She was jostled along to the kitchen, buffeted till she spun like a top, and bombarded with questions. She looked in bewilderment from face to face, and at last she saw a friendly and familiar one.

"Manson!" she said.

It was not difficult to persuade Manson to take a message to Mistress Carmichael, for Manson remembered her own humble childhood, and had already taken a fancy to the sober-faced child. She adjusted her cap in the mirror and, with a brisk reassuring nod to Thirza, stalked from the room.

When she returned a few minutes later her face was stiff and dour. She said gruffly, "Well, I saw her. She said to tell you to go away this minute. She said you could come back some other day. During the *day*, she said. She was real cross."

Thirza stared.

"Did you tell her about my mither?"

"I did that."

Thirza could not believe it. She simply stood and stared. She had depended utterly on Mistress Carmichael. Her eyes screamed, but she stood quite still and silent.

"Sit down now," Manson said sharply, "and have a bite o' food afore you go. You maun be hungry."

Thirza shook her head.

"Jean, pass that plate o' sandwiches."

Thirza shook her head again.

"An éclair, then. You never tasted the like o' these."

"No," Thirza said. "I'm nae seekin' naething." Bolt upright, only her legs moving, she walked to the kitchen door.

Manson put a hand briefly on her shoulder. "Do you ken the road to the gates? Or will I send one of the lassies wi' you?"

"I ken the road," Thirza said.

She walked into the dusk of the back-yard. When she came to the gable of the house she leaned against the wall, her eyes closed. After a little she became aware that she was hearing drifts of music from the ballroom and, listening consciously, she took a grip of herself and began to think. She thought: "Manson couldn't have explained. If Manson had explained, Mistress Carmichael would never have sent me away. Mistress Carmichael is my friend."

She thought: "If I had seen Mistress Carmichael myself. . . ."

She walked quickly round to the front of the house.

The music led her to the ballroom. She reconnoitred the windows. The central french windows were wide open, and she could have stepped through them into the ballroom, but she did not think of doing so. She approached the nearest of the side windows and, pressing her face against the glass, stared inside.

In different circumstances she would have been happy to stand for hours admiring the wonders of the ball. Now, she barely noticed the magnificent candelabra, the sumptuous wall drapings, the blue-jacketed orchestra on the ornamented dais. She took no heed of the ladies' gowns and jewels, and she did not waste as much as a glance on any man. She was interested only in finding Janet Carmichael. Her eyes raked the room, but without success.

She saw Susan, however, and immediately waved, scoring the palm of her hand on the window.

Susan passed quite close, but did not notice Thirza. She had eyes only for her partner. This was Susan's first ball. She wore a dress with a low neck and a pair of silver dancing pumps, and she felt like Cinderella. Mamma had said she could have two hours. Father had said she was too young to appear on a ballroom floor, but Mamma had pooh-poohed him, saying that he was old-fashioned. Mamma said that, in view of the fact that the ball was to be in their own house, there was no harm at all in Susan appearing briefly on the floor. "There is nothing like a ball to give a young girl poise," Mamma had said. "You can have till ten o'clock, Susan." And her father had added: "But not one minute more." And so Susan was making the most of her two hours, dancing every dance, and between dances using her fan in the manner born. Her only regret was that this could not go on for ever.

Thirza's eyes followed Susan round the room. Several couples

had noticed the child's face at the window, and when Thirza saw them looking at her she nodded urgently and pointed towards Susan. "Tell her," she said, mouthing the words, but the people to whom she mouthed didn't seem to understand. Some laughed. Others looked away haughtily. One jolly young lady mimicked her, gesturing as if she too were scrabbling on a window-pane and waggling her mouth like an idiot. Thirza grew very impatient, and as Susan was about to pass the window for the third time she rapped sharply on the pane with her knuckles.

Susan saw her then and ran to the open french windows.

"Thirza!" she said. "What is it? What are you doing here?"

"It's my mither," Thirza said. "She's verra bad."

"What's the matter with her, Thirza?"

"It's her womb. The doctor says it's her stomach, but my mither says it's her womb. Her womb is terrible bad. I think maybe she's deein'!"

"Susan!" Janet Carmichael's voice said. "Susan!"

"There's Mamma," Susan said. "I'll tell Mamma, Thirza."

"What are you doing out there, Susan? Who is that?"

Janet Carmichael stepped on to the lawn, holding her skirts between thumb and forefinger. She saw Thirza then and her voice sharpened with vexation. "I thought I told you to go. This is too bad. Mr. Carmichael is quite right, I am always being imposed upon. It really is too bad that you should pester me like this. To-night of all nights." And she tapped a foot imperiously on the ground. "Susan, come here at once."

"Mamma, Thirza's mother is very ill."

"Kindly be silent. Thank you, Captain Archibald. Thank you so much. It's quite all right. No, nothing at all. Nothing, thank you. I shall ring for one of the servants to eject her. It is merely a beggar child."

Thirza pressed the back of her hand to her mouth. Black-eyed, she stared for a moment in unbelieving horror at Janet Carmichael's smiling party profile, and then she whirled about and ran like a wounded animal into the trees.

CHAPTER VI

(1)

WHEN SHE GOT HOME THE house was silent. Her father was sitting at the bedside, and as she entered he put his finger to his lips and said, "S-sh." She stood looking at him, her shoulders down, her arms limp at her sides. She could not see her mother because the bed was in the shadows, but she heard the regular pump of her breathing and knew her to be asleep. She sighed heavily with relief and went and sat down by the fire. Straddling her legs to prevent herself from falling off the stool, she sat swaying, her elbows on her knees and her chin in her cupped hands. She was very, very tired.

After a few minutes her father tiptoed across the room to her and they carried on a whispered conversation, in the course of which he told her that her mother had been asleep for an hour, and she, frowning with the effort of remembering, told him of her visit to the doctor's. She said nothing about Carmichael House, and her father did not ask what had delayed her. His face was gaunt and yellow, and as he spoke he glanced repeatedly over his shoulder at the bed.

"Go to your ain bed now," he said. "I'll bide up for a bit."

She slipped off her dress and tumbled into bed.

In less than a minute she was asleep.

She was awakened by her father shaking her roughly by the shoulder. The room was full of noise, and whenever she woke she knew that it had been going on for a long time and that she had been hearing it in her sleep. Her mother was screaming like a scalded cat. The sound froze her stomach and she burrowed her face hard into the pillow in a vain effort to shut out awareness. Her father lifted her bodily and shook her, and she opened her eyes and saw that the room was full of moonlight. When her father laid her down she caught at his legs to steady herself.

"Get the doctor," her father said. He spoke wildly, his hair was dishevelled, and his eyes frightened her, they were themselves so

frightened. "Quick! And dinna come back withoot him." He gave Thirza a shove and she stumbled towards the door. "Your cla'es!" he shouted. "Put on your cla'es!"

She groped for her dress and threw it over her head.

Her mother's screaming continued unabated. It was a fearful noise, a keening wail that swelled with the recurrent flow of the pain to a high-pitched, throbbing shriek. Her father stood nibbling at his finger-nails. "God have mercy. Hurry," he said.

Thirza slammed the door. It was a relief to run, to pound her bare feet recklessly on the ash path. She had a lump in her chest like undigested apple, but she did not resent the pain. It seemed only right that she should have a little pain when her mother had so much. On the far side of the Brig she dropped to a walk. She began to think then, and she did not want to think, so she whipped up her strength and stumbled again into a run.

The moonlight laid strange, jutting shadows across the Kaysie roads. She ran through a dead and unfamiliar town. She had difficulty in recognising even well-known landmarks, and at the top of the Nethergate she had to stop and think hard before she could decide on the opening that led to the doctor's house.

Ah, at last!

She grasped the bell-pull like an old friend's hand.

The housekeeper regarded her without enthusiasm, retired grumbling up the stairs, and, after a long interval, returned to say, "The doctor says he kens the case. He can do naething. Keep her warm, and he'll look inbye the morn's morn."

"He maun come now," Thirza said.

"He can do naething."

The door was slammed in her face.

Thirza reached deliberately for the bell-pull. She rang violently. She was still ringing when the door opened again.

"He can do naething, I tell you," the housekeeper said, shouting. "Go away!"

"He maun come," Thirza said. "I'll bide here and ring the bell until he comes."

"What's 'at? What you say?"

"I'll just ring awa'," Thirza said. "Like this." She set the bell jangling again. It had a harsh and strident tone: the makers had

guaranteed it to wake the deaf. "I'll ring a' night if needs be," she said.

"Bella," the doctor's voice roared. "*Bella!*"

"Was that him?" the old woman asked. When Thirza nodded she turned away and scuttled towards the stairs.

"And tell him," Thirza called after her, "that my mither's verra bad. She canna keep her mouth shut for the pain."

She heard the doctor's voice above the clamour of the bell and stepped into the hall to listen.

"What of it?" the doctor roared. "There's life in a mussel as lang as it can cheep. Here, get me my baggie then. Hold up the light there. It's laudanum I want. This bottle. Has't got the prescription on 't? Where are my specs? Get me my specs out of my coat. No, not that pocket, woman. The front pocket. Damn you for a dottled auld crone. For twenty years you've seen me lift my specs from that particular pocket. Now hold up wi' the light and stand at peace. Ay, that's right. Now give her that bottle and tell her to obey the printed instructions. One drachm's the dose, one drachm only. It'd quiet the devil himself. And if so hap that disna settle her mother, tell her to get the priest, and tell her above all to step off my doorstep AND LET GO THAT DAMN BELL!"

There was relative silence during which the stairs creaked and Thirza caught a glimpse of the housekeeper's feet.

"Woman!" It was a loud and irascible bellow. The feet turned about and retreated from sight. "For the love of God, woman, am I never to get any sleep? Will you blow out that accursed lamp!"

The housekeeper came plodding downstairs.

"You're to obey the instructions," she shouted. "One drachm."

Thirza snatched the bottle and fled.

As she reached the gate an upper window was wrenched open and the doctor's voice trumpeted out into the garden.

"Gare!"

Thirza stopped. She could see nobody. "Me?"

"You. One teaspoonful. You understand? The dose is one drachm or one teaspoonful. It's written on the label. That's laudanum you've got. Dangerous drug. One teaspoonful only. Now get out!"

The window slammed shut.

Running back to the Fishertown, Thirza held the bottle at arm's

length and examined it as best she could in the moonlight. It was a very small bottle. She found it hard to believe that so small a bottle could be so effective. The doctor had given her mother a bottle before. It had been filled with a sweet-smelling red liquid, and it had been at least twice as big as this bottle, yet it had done her mother no good at all. "Coloured water," her mother had said. "It gives me the heartburn." This was different, though. This was special medicine, so special that the doctor had said a dose of it would quiet the devil himself. She clutched the bottle with both hands for safety and raced on.

At the foot of the Slope she paused to recover strength for the climb. There were lights in several of the surrounding cottage windows, and she asked herself why so many people should be awake and answered herself that it must be because of her mother's screams. She shook the bottle and put it to her mouth and whispered over it like a gambler's talisman, then she tackled the Slope. She heard her mother from a long way off and groaned aloud at the sound. She had already forgotten this aspect of the illness. She had been thinking of her mother with compassion, and now fear rushed in and replaced the compassion. Her hair stood on end. She was desperately sorry for her mother, but she was even more desperately afraid of these inhuman shrieks. If at that moment she had been granted a single wish, she would have wished not that her mother would get better but merely that the noise would stop.

Eyes glazing over with fear, she opened the door and went in.

"The doctor wouldna come," she said. "Said there was naething he could do, but he gave me this." She put the bottle in her father's hand. "He said a teaspoonful would quiet the devil. Just give her a teaspoonful, he said."

"What kind of spoonful?"

"I think he said a teaspoonful."

They stared at each other. Neither knew what a teaspoon was.

"Is that all he said?"

"No," Thirza said, thinking. "He said to read the printed instructions. That's the writing on the bottle."

Alexander Gare held the bottle close to the lamp, examining the label, frowning. He stared for a very long time and sweat broke in pimples on his brow. "Did he say naething else? Try to mind."

"He said give her a drachm. A drachm is one teaspoonful. He said it was written down."

"A dram!" Alexander caught at the familiar word. "Aye, it's here in the writing, nae doubt. Are you sure he said a dram, Thirza?"

"Sure's I'm standin' here. He said it was laudanum. Will I get the spoon, Father?"

"Aye, quick, ere she starts up again."

Thirza brought out the big bone spoon. It was the only sort of spoon that was in common use in the Fishertown, and it served equally as a ladle and as a soup and porridge spoon. Alexander poured in what he called "a fair-sized dram," and they raised Bathia on the pillows and forced this lethal dose between her teeth.

(2)

It was morning before they discovered that Bathia was dead.

The doctor came at 10 a.m. He raised Bathia's eyelids and prised open her mouth to look at her tongue. He picked up the laudanum bottle and examined the level of the contents. He said, "Well, you killed her all right. How much did you give her?"

"A spoonful," Alexander Gare said.

The doctor looked at the large bone spoon on the table. "That spoon?"

"Ay."

"I wrote very plainly on the label," Dr. Grant said, reading. "'Dose, one drachm = one-eighth of an ounce or one small teaspoonful.' Didn't you read it?" He opened his small leather bag and stowed the bottle. "I suppose you can't read." He was neither surprised nor angry. He had seen too much of this sort of thing among the poor and ignorant. He was indifferent. He fixed the clasp of his bag and straightened up. "It's a great pity you couldn't read, for it certainly cost her her life. Send your girl along to-morrow morning and I'll have the death certificate ready."

"I gave her a fair-sized dram," Alexander Gare said. "The lassie said give her a dram. I only gave her a dram, doctor."

"You only gave her enough to kill her ten times over," the doctor said. "The dose was not a dram, but a *drachm* or sixty grains. You

gave her more than six hundred. Send the girl after nine to-morrow morning." He went out.

"Father," Thirza said. "It's not true!"

She pulled his sleeve. "Father!"

He ignored her. He stood like a figure of stone.

"Oh, he's a liar, he's a liar," she said, and she flung open the door and rushed out.

The doctor was mounting his horse.

"My father can read," she said passionately. "He can so. You're just tryin' to put the blame on him. He reads the Bible every night."

"He recites from the Bible," the doctor said. "He knows long passages by heart like most of the other fishers around here." He noted the horror in the child's face and held his horse. "There was no harm done," he said, speaking almost gently. "Your mother was dying. It was the best thing that could have happened." And he slapped the mare's rump and rode off.

Thirza returned slowly to the house. She walked up to her father and touched him. "Father," she said. "Can you read?" She caught his arm and shook it in a frenzy of impotence. "Father," she said, shouting. "Father!"

He looked down at her.

"Father," she said, begging for reassurance. "You can read, can't you?"

He did not reply.

She searched in his eyes, found her answer, and walked slowly to her mother's chair. She sat and stared into the fire. "He canna read," she said aloud.

(3)

Two days later, while Bathia Gare's body still lay in the bed, MacGregor arrived from Carmichael House with a large and elaborate wreath of white roses, lilies, and maidenhair ferns. Thirza refused to accept it, but MacGregor had his orders, and his orders were to leave the wreath; and so when Thirza slammed the door in his face he merely swore under his breath and departed, leaving the wreath propped against the wall.

Within five minutes, two neighbours had called separately to tell

Thirza of the wreath and to ply her with questions. She gave them short shrift, but she took the wreath indoors. She laid it on the table and examined it.

It was undoubtedly a beautiful wreath.

In its heart, held between two wire struts, was an envelope, and inside the envelope a card. One side read simply MRS. R. J. CARMICHAEL, CARMICHAEL HOUSE, BY KAYSIE, BANFFSHIRE. This was in print, and Thirza was able to finger-read it. The other side contained handwriting, and this of course Thirza could not understand. She glanced at it incuriously and threw the card in the fire. She wanted nothing more to do with Janet Carmichael. She blamed her for her mother's death. She hated Janet Carmichael and all her works, and her works included this wreath.

She stood, thinking. Her first impulse had been to take the wreath out and throw it among the refuse at the dump, but on second thoughts she knew that she could not bring herself to do anything so wasteful. She decided to sell it.

She took it to Alec Chalmers.

When you lifted the latch of Chalmers' house-shop a bell jangled and Alec or his son Sandy came through from the other room.

It was Sandy who inspected Thirza's wreath.

"It's real bonny," he admitted. He called his father through. "She wants to sell it," he said.

"How much is she askin'?"

"I didna speir."

"How much?" Alec Chalmers said to Thirza.

"I dinna ken," Thirza said.

"I'll gi'e you threepence."

Thirza was disappointed. She had, generally speaking, a good idea of the value of money. She could precisely judge the price of food and she would haggle for half an hour over a farthing. She had thought that an article like a wreath would be worth more than threepence, but she could not be sure. It was outside her experience.

"I'll tell you what," Alec Chalmers said, seeing her hesitation. "I'll throw in a cabbage. There you are now." And he winked knowingly to his son. "The fattest and best."

"No," Thirza said. "It's not enough." She had seen the wink

and her dander was up. She was sure now that she was being cheated. She picked up the wreath and made for the door. She would try elsewhere for a sale.

"I'll give you sixpence," Alec Chalmers said. "A silver sixpence."

She shook her head.

"Thirza Gare," he said. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself trying to sell your mother's wreath!" He came to the door and shouted after her. "Away with you," he shouted. "Dinna come here and try your tricks. You ought to have more respect for the dead. Your own mother not yet buried, and you'd come here to an honest man and try to sell her wreath! Go!" he shouted. "Go, before I lose my temper!"

At the end of the lane Thirza looked back and saw that a small crowd had collected at the door of the Chalmers' shop. They were looking in her direction, and she knew that they were talking about her. Alec Chalmers shook his fist and shouted again, but she did not hear what he said. She was startled but undismayed by the fuss. She tossed her head ostentatiously and turned the corner.

She would go to Kaysie.

As she bore the wreath through the Fishertown she was aware of many curious glances. Women who did not usually speak to her stopped up and would have started a conversation, but she gave them good day and passed on.

Brodie & Co. was her objective.

Brodie & Co., seedsmen, one of the most dignified shops in Kaysie, with two big windows, *Seeds and Fruit,* in the Low Street, and a side window, in Patter Lane, exhibiting *High-class Floral Tributes*. She left her wreath outside the shop, smoothed her dress, slicked her hair, and went in. She searched among the wreaths until she found the biggest and best.

"How much?" she asked.

The shop assistant was a chubby-faced boy of about fourteen. He looked her up and down contemptuously.

"How much?" she repeated.

"It's not for the likes o' you."

"How much does it cost?" she said patiently.

"Seven shillings and elevenpence ha'penny, if you must know."

She nodded reflectively and went outside for her wreath. It was

as big as Brodie's biggest wreath, it had roses where Brodie's had only lilies, and it was better arranged.

As she returned a man emerged from the back shop and, ignoring the boy, she addressed herself to this man.

"What'll you give me for my wreath?" she said.

"Is it your own?"

"It's my ain a' right."

"I'll give you half a crown.".

"That wreath of yours," she said, nodding, "costs seven and elevenpence ha'penny, and it's not as good as this one. I'll sell you it for five shillings."

The man examined her wreath carefully. He balanced it in his hand to feel the weight. "We don't buy wreaths," he said. "We make our own."

"Five shillings," Thirza said.

"Hamish," the man said to the boy. "Run across the street to the Registrar's and find out is old Mr. Creighton gone yet, does he know?"

The boy was back within a few minutes.

"Died at eleven last night," he said.

The man looked at the wreath once more. He turned it end for end and examined the wiring. "It's not worth the money," he said to himself. "Not worth it." And he looked shrewdly at Thirza and said in a sharp voice, "I'll give you four shillings for it."

"Five," Thirza said.

"Is that your last word?"

"Yes."

"All right, five shillings it is." To her great surprise he opened the till and counted out five single shillings. He placed them in Thirza's outstretched hand. "You're a hard case."

"Thank you," Thirza said, elated.

When she had gone a few yards down the street she stopped and counted the coins. Yes, there were five. Five beautiful silver shillings. She had never had so much wealth in her hand. As she walked home jingling the coins, she thought with some complacency of her cleverness. This was her first experience of business, and she found it to her taste. To think that Alec Chalmers had offered her only threepence and thought her soft enough to take it!

She smiled with secret satisfaction. She had not only made money, she had also, she felt, got something of her own back on Janet Carmichael. She shifted the coins from hand to hand. Her eyes gleamed, and for a moment she looked almost beautiful. Yes, indeed, she had done Mistress Carmichael well and truly in the eye!

Later, she gave the five shillings to her father. Her father had been very strange since her mother's death. Sometimes, when she spoke to him, he did not hear. He forgot to wipe his feet when he came in. He even forgot to eat. He sat in the rocker chair and stared fixedly into the fire. She could make nothing of him. When she wanted to attract his attention she had not only to speak but also to touch him. She poked him now, handed him the coins, and said, "That'll pay the doctor, Father." She knew he worried a great deal about paying the doctor.

Her father looked for a long time at the shillings. "Where did you get them?" he asked.

"Never mind where I got them; put them in your purse."

He stared at her in perplexity.

"Put them in your purse," she said sharply. The voice which she heard was her mother's, although it was, of course, she herself who had used it. She saw from her father's face that he too had recognised the voice, and an uneasy silence settled between them. She did not dare speak again, but she gave a short, imperious nod, and to her great satisfaction her father drew out his purse and, without a word, dropped the coins into it.

(4)

When it became known that Thirza Gare had pawned her mother's wreath there was universal indignation in the Fishertown. Her name was on everyone's lips. Mothers forbade their daughters to speak to her, and the elders of the Kirk met to consider disciplinary measures. The town was genuinely affronted. It regarded Thirza as a monster.

The tale did not spread as far as Carmichael House, however, for at the end of October Janet Carmichael made another handsome effort at conciliation. She sent a hamper.

Thirza found this hamper outside the door when she returned

from a morning's shopping. She dragged it into the house and, opening it, was at first disappointed to find that it contained not food but clothes.

Her disappointment was short-lived, for they were clothes such as she had never seen before. Taffetas, glacé and chine in stripes and checks; a redingote of white muslin over lilac, trimmed with tulle; muslin dresses with gimps and Marquise buttons; a crape skirt with deep flounces of black lace; a leghorn bonnet and a fancy straw trimmed with velvet; a variety of coloured petticoats; three silk chemises; two pairs of frilled pantaloons with satin ribbons at the ankles.

Thirza piled these treasures, one by one, on the bed and examined them with incredulous awe.

She did not mean to keep them. She had not the slightest intention of keeping them. Even so, there was no harm in looking at them. She let her fingers fall on the hem of a satin petticoat; she stroked it respectfully. She held one of the dresses against her shoulders. It looked as if it would fit, but you couldn't ever tell until you had actually tried it on. And what was the use of trying on a dress that you did not mean to keep?

"No use at all," she said aloud.

Nevertheless, she tiptoed across the room, closed and bolted the door. And then, breathing heavily with excitement, she stripped to the skin.

The chemises first. They fitted admirably.

The pants next. The pants disappointed. They were tight in the seat. If, however, one comported oneself in a ladylike fashion, bending seldom and then only from the waist, one could wear them in safety. And if—*if* she were to keep them, she could very soon put them to rights. She examined her undercarriage by touch. Yes. All they needed was a gusset.

Now the petticoats. The petticoats were so beautiful that it seemed sinful to cover them. She put them on, one on top of the other—the mauve, then the green, then the blue—and pirouetted about the room, listening with delight to their adult, rustling sounds.

She pulled the yellow striped dress over her head. It struck her as a very unusual kind of dress, for it had hooks at the back. She could not fasten these hooks. She did not dare to wriggle for fear

of splitting her pants. She had no doubt that if she took off the pants she could fasten the dress, but the pants were so elegant that she could not bear to take them off. She made do with the unhooked dress.

Now she examined herself as best she could. She peered down over her shoulder to see how she looked from the side. She stretched out one leg and raised her skirts in order to get a simultaneous view of all three petticoats and her pantaloon leg. What a pity there were no shoes and stockings! She rushed to the hamper and delved among the wrappings.

No. No stockings. No shoes.

She half-closed her eyes and imagined the stockings and shoes. It was easy. The stockings were white. Stay! Yes, silk. And the shoes, of course, were silver. With buckles. There were jewels on the buckles. One hand on her back holding the unfastened dress, she minced across the room to the fireside. She sat down carefully in the wicker chair and, fanning herself with an imaginary fan, looked up languidly at the imaginary young duke. "No, sir," she said. "I have danced sufficient." And she gave a roguish smile and looked down at a bare foot. "My shoe is hurting," she said, wriggling her toes so that the jewelled buckle of the imaginary shoe gave off a radiance like a halo. "It is time you danced with some of the others. I'll just sit here on my backside for a bit."

The folded crinoline intrigued her. It was a special collapsible model designed for a travelling case, and it had, in addition to an arc of whalebone, an elaborate metal framework garnished with bolts and screws. It was some time before she discovered the principle on which the mechanism worked. At last, however, she had the whole crinoline adjusted to her satisfaction, and she set it up inside the green taffeta glacé.

The problem now was, how to enter it.

After several vain attempts she took off her pantaloons and set to in grim earnest. The obvious approach was from underneath and she tried this first. She crawled under the hem of the dress like an Indian worming into a bell tent and, in the darkness of the interior, worked her way past hoop after hoop till she came to the small metal waist-band. There she stuck. She got her head through by brute force, but her shoulders would not follow it. She had the

greatest difficulty in retracting her head, and in the process stubbed her nose and lost a handful of hair. She emerged red-faced, watery-eyed, and cross, baffled but not beaten. She sat down on the bed and, with her head cocked first on one side then on the other, studied the crinoline and its problem.

She came to the conclusion that the only way to enter was from the top. She laid the dress on its back on the floor and, herself lying on her back, tried to wriggle in, feet first. The attempt was not a success. Her feet caught in folds of the material, and there was a grave danger that she would tear it.

She set the contraption upright and retired again to the bed.

It was hard to believe that a lady had to jump into her crinoline, yet obviously there was no other way to enter it. She pulled the crinoline close to the bed, opened up the bodice to reveal the waist hoop, and in desperation leapt two-footed from the bed, landing hip-high and triumphant inside the hoop. One foot was already touching the floor. It was quite simple to shrug and wriggle till the other foot also struck bottom. She slipped her arms into the bodice and beamed with honest satisfaction. She had done it. She had mastered the crinoline.

She tried on the bonnets. Then she examined the results in Bathia's small metal box mirror, and was well pleased with what she saw. A young lady of fashion. She had to admit that the bonnets were slightly on the large side, but, for all that, she thought them very becoming.

Later—much later—she undressed and replaced the clothes in the hamper, handling each garment with the greatest care. It occurred to her, as she filled up the box, that it was going to be very difficult to return this chest to Carmichael House. How could she return it? She could not lift it, and she doubted if even her father would be able to carry it for any distance.

Meantime, she would stow it behind the box bed.

She did so.

How bare and drab the room looked without the clothes! She had a pot on the fire. She lifted the lid and glanced at her stew. She went to the door and put her hand up above her eyes and searched for her father, and then she returned to the fire and looked at the stew again. She could not settle.

"There would be no harm done," she said aloud, "if I kept one semet."

After all, Mistress Carmichael had no use for the clothes. These were Mistress Carmichael's old clothes. When she returned them no doubt Mistress Carmichael would merely throw them away.

She dragged out the hamper and removed a chemise. She put it on, and then her old dress on top.

And why not keep just one of the petticoats?

The blue one.

The green one was nice too.

So was the mauve. The mauve one was trimmed with a brown-coloured lace. This lace looked dirty at first sight, but it wasn't really. When you examined it carefully you saw that it was meant to be like that. It was very beautiful.

Why not keep all the petticoats? If she returned them Mistress Carmichael would certainly throw them away.

She paced the room. She bit her lip. She frowned.

She closed her eyes to think, and when she did so she saw Janet Carmichael's beautiful profile, heard again the beautiful voice:

"It is merely a beggar child."

She grimaced fiercely.

She would keep the clothes. She would keep them, and she wouldn't say thank you. Just let them try to make her say thank you! They might torture her; they might tear her limb from limb. She still wouldn't say thank you. She would admit to no obligation. She would keep the clothes because she chose to keep the clothes, and she would keep them as a matter of right.

Furthermore, if that was not sufficient, she would keep them for spite.

She sighed. Now that she had decided on a course of action she was pleased, but disturbed. She knew that she was committing a major sin.

CHAPTER VII

(1)

HER MOTHER'S DEATH BROUGHT THIRZA and her father into closer contact, but it also in some measure estranged them. Thirza could not forget that her father was partly responsible for the accident which had ended her mother's life. She could not forgive him for the mockery of his "reading." She had lost respect for him.

She was not aware of this.

She knew only that there had been some sort of change in their relations, and that now she treated her father as an equal and spoke her mind freely to him.

It was not till many years later that Thirza, looking back at her childhood, came to realise that her father was a weakling. No one had ever suspected this while her mother was alive, because her mother had gone to such a deal of trouble to conceal it. By a hundred little stratagems Bathia had deliberately built up her husband in the rôle of head of the house, and it was only after her death that it began to be understood how much Alexander Gare had owed to his wife, and how little he amounted to, without her.

Thirza now took control of the house and of the purse. She decided what her father should wear and when he should take a bath. She doled out his pocket-money. She even gave authoritative opinions on such matters as lines and bait, and it was she who decided whether a net, ripped to shreds by dogfish, should be repaired or replaced.

Apart from the minor worries incidental to her new responsibilities Thirza had two main preoccupations. The first was fear for Davy, whom she now loved more passionately than ever. The second was her trunkful of clothes.

She was constantly irked by the thought of these clothes. It was heart-breaking to have so many beautiful clothes and yet to be unable to wear them. She wore the chemises, of course, and she took up a deep hem in the blue petticoat and wore it on special

occasions under her dress. It was comforting to know that her underclothes were the best in the Fishertown, but it would have been satisfying only if everyone else had known as well, and no one knew. She would have given a great deal to go to church just once in all her finery, but that was out of the question. It would not have been fitting for a fisher-girl to be seen in fashionable clothes. It would simply not have been proper, and Thirza had a keen sense of propriety.

She was not a prude, however, as her mother had been. Her mother would not strip to the skin in front of anyone. When she had taken a bath in the tub she had blocked up the window and turned even Davy out. Thirza was more sensible. She knew that dogs did not count in such matters, and when her father was away at the fishing, she often perched Davy on the stool and paraded her wardrobe before him. On these occasions she did not allow his attention to wander. She talked to him incessantly, and, if the need arose, sharply. She kept him bolt upright and attentive. He was her only confidant, and she used him shamelessly. She unloaded her worries on him. She told him her fondest ambitions.

"Some day," she would say, pacing the room in her crinoline, "we'll have not only a bath, Davy, but a mirror forbye. A glass mirror. Ay, the size of a door!"

Occasionally, when the day's work was done, she would take out her father's Bible and try to read, but the light was bad, and after a little the letters would blur and her thoughts would wander. Sometimes her head fell forward on her arms and she dozed, her nose on the Holy Word, and then she would waken with a sense of guilt and glare angrily at Davy.

"You wait," she said. "I'll read and write. I swear I will, Davy." And she would stalk the floor again, taut with determination. "I will. I will."

Davy merely wagged his tail.

It was a source of great anxiety to her that, chained as she was to the house, she could no longer keep an eye on Davy when he set out on one of his frequent expeditions. She awaited his home-coming in a state of nervous excitement, went repeatedly to the door to scan the braes for him, and always made a great fuss of him when he did eventually come home.

One day in February he disappeared in the early morning, and did not return. Thirza sat up waiting long after her usual bedtime. When at last she did go to bed she slept fitfully, woke several times, and went vainly to the door.

In the morning she went to the fleshers. She was sick with dread.

This was by no means the first time that Davy had spent the night away from home. It was, however, the first time that she had real cause to worry, for now the whole district was up in arms against dogs, and in particular dogs like Davy who wore no collar and looked like strays. The previous week there had been a death from hydrophobia. The victim was a four-year-old Kaysie boy, the son of William Gregor, stone-mason, who, while sitting inoffensively on his mother's door-step, had been bitten by a rabid dog. Medical aid had been immediately summoned, antidotes administered, and every care and attention lavished on the boy, but it had been to no effect. The malady had run its dreadful course. After terrible sufferings the child had died. This tragedy aroused strong feelings in the town. A fund was opened for the relatives of the deceased child. Public meetings were held in Kaysie Town Hall, and speakers suggested variously that all dogs should be shot, muzzled, and chained. Both ministers spoke from the pulpit of "the menace in our midst," and an extraordinary meeting of the Town Council was convened to debate the dog problem.

It was against this background of events that Thirza went across to Kaysie to the fleshers to search for Davy.

She inspected the "kennels" with characteristic thoroughness. There were more dogs inbye than she had ever seen before, including some whom she thought she knew, but Davy was not among them. Nor was his skin hanging up to dry. She did not forget to consider the possibility that Davy might have been dyed, but she was satisfied that she would recognise him in any colour, dead or alive, and that he was not there. She spoke to the dogs she knew, petted some of the more friendly ones, thanked Mr. Imlach coldly, and left the kennels.

She returned to the Fishertown and systematically toured Davy's haunts—the harbour, Thomson's curing yards (where the girls sometimes threw him scraps), the Dump, the braehead, Fyntie's Barn (where he had been known to go ratting), and the Watery Hole.

She enquired of everyone who might have news, but encountered no one who had seen or heard of him.

She learned that there was a bitch in heat at the top of the Gallowhill, and so she trudged back to Kaysie, located the owner's cottage, and made the necessary enquiries.

Again she drew a blank.

She returned to the Fishertown, to the house. She had come to a momentous decision. Her father was waiting, and she slapped his dinner into the pot. "Take it aff when it's ready," she said. "I'm nae seekin' none masel'. I'm awa' to look for Davy. I think I ken where he is."

"Where are you goin'?" her father asked, surprised.

"The Daft Dominie's," she said.

(2)

It was common gossip among the younger children of the Fishertown that the Daft Dominie stole a dog or two each week to sell to the fleshers. This was the least of his crimes. His other activities were so dark and sinister that those children who knew of them would not even speak of them. They hinted, however. They hinted at strange and occult things, and while they spoke—always in whispers—their listeners felt the furry brush of bats' wings upon their cheeks, saw the green glowing eyes of the cat that was really a witch, heard the Dominie's weird incantations as he stirred his midnight brew, and listened with their eyes popping out of their small heads to the demoniacal shrieks that not even the most ingenious narrator could explain.

Thirza had no doubt that the Daft Dominie was a fiend, and that he lived surrounded by all the trappings of sorcery. She had known this for some years, but, being a sensible child, she had not allowed herself to think of it. Having decided to beard him in his lair, she had now no choice, however, but to think—and think seriously—of it, and as she left the town behind and penetrated into the Sucky Moor, her step, which had been brisk when she left home, faltered and became uncommonly slow. She was sorely tempted to give up and go home, but she reminded herself that it was broad daylight, that the Dominie might be out, and that Davy depended on her. She bore painfully on.

The Daft Dominie lived in a hovel which had once been a small bothy. He had not always lived here. As schoolmaster he had, of course, lived in some style in the Schoolhouse, and when he was expelled he had gone as a paying guest to Mistress Bisset. He had not paid very regularly, however, and Mistress Bisset had passed him on to Mistress Wilson and Mistress Wilson had passed him on to Mistress Cowie. Mistress Cowie gave him board and lodgings for five weeks without seeing as much as a bawbee, and after Mistress Cowie turned him out there was no one in either Kaysie or the Fishertown who would take him in. He disappeared for several weeks. It was understood with satisfaction that he had left the district, but in due course his craving asserted itself and he turned up at the *Black Bull,* where, as usual, he offered an armful of books in exchange for a tot. It was discovered then that he had taken possession of the deserted bothy at the edge of the moorland. There was some agitation from time to time to have him ejected, but nothing ever came of it. No one knew exactly the legal position. No one knew who owned the bothy, and no one had any real grievance against the man.

The bothy was built of clay. Its eastern gable had all but collapsed, and the Dominie had shored it up with driftwood and stones from the beach. There were no windows and no chimney. Ventilation was provided by a hole cut in the thatching of the roof, and as Thirza approached she was distressed to observe that a thin wisp of smoke was emerging from this hole.

She came to a stop several yards from the door and, standing rigid and half-turned to run, shouted: "Dominie!"

She heard a voice, *his voice,* say, "Bless my soul," and after a moment the door opened and his head peered out. He made what she thought at first was a horrible grimace, but which she later came to recognise as a smile, and said gruffly, "Hullo."

She said, "I want my dog."

He didn't understand.

"A little black and white dog," she said. "Davy. He's nae use to you, because he's ower wee an' he's my dog, an' I want him. My name's Thirza Gare, an' anybody in the Fishertown'll tell you Davy's my dog, an' I ken fine you've got him inbye, and what's more, my father kens I've come here because I telt him, an' so

you needn't try to trap me, an' I want my dog now, please."

Thirza delivered this speech at high tension, in a loud and threatening voice. It was not intelligible.

"Don't shout, lassie," the Dominie said. "Inhale deeply, consider your argument well, and put it to me briefly and concisely."

Thirza did so.

The Dominie listened gravely to her allegations. Occasionally he nodded in understanding, and when she had finished he opened the door wide and bowed to her to enter. "I see it will not avail me to deny that I have your dog. Pray step inside and search my quarters. They are entirely at your disposal."

"I'm nae eager to come in," Thirza said.

He did not press her.

"But I will," she said. "Only dinna try to trap me, for, mind, my father kens I'm here."

She went in.

At first she saw nothing but books. Books of all kinds and sizes. There were books stacked high against the walls. Books littered the floor, and books—alas, yes—books were burning in the fire. If she had had any doubts of the Daft Dominie's sanity they would have vanished at the sight of these thousands of books. The man was plainly mad. When she had recovered from her first shock of surprise she examined the room more carefully and discovered among the books a bed of sorts, a table, and a peculiar wire object half concealed by a coat.

The Dominie lifted the lid from a box full of books, wiped it, and motioned her to sit down.

"I'll stand," she said.

He followed her eyes on their lightning trip round the room. "I have little company," he said apologetically. "Had I known to expect you I should have set my library in order."

"What's that?" she demanded, nodding at the shrouded object.

"That's a cage."

"What's in it?"

"A parrot."

"Where's your cat?"

"I don't own a cat."

"What happened to it?"

"I have never had a cat."

She looked at him searchingly.

"I don't like cats," he said. "But I thought it was a dog you were seeking."

"It is a dog. Let's see in the cage."

He lifted off the coat to reveal a cage occupied by an old dowdy parrot.

"What's its name?"

"Socrates."

"That's a queer name."

"It is an honourable name. It is the name of an Ancient Greek philosopher. A very wise man."

"Still an' all," she said, "it's not a right name for a parrot. All the parrots I know are called Polly."

"You can call this one Polly if you please," the Dominie said. "*Cucullus non facit monachum* 'As the rose, so the parrot'. The name does not signify. Pray call him Polly if it gives you pleasure."

"Does he speak?"

"Not much."

"What use is a parrot that disna speak?"

"Very little, I suppose." He considered this thoughtfully. "He keeps me company."

She sighed. She could see no sign of Davy. She could see no sign of any abnormality at all, except of course these thousands of books. She made a last attempt, however. "Well now," she said, "where's my dog?"

"I don't know. I have not seen a dog for a long time."

"Cross your heart?"

He nodded.

"Say it."

"Cross my heart," he said.

She no longer felt afraid. She passed within a few inches of the Dominie without a qualm. She paused at the door and looked back at the books.

"What do you do with them?" she asked.

"The books? I read them."

"Can you read?"

"Certainly. I'm like Socrates. I am a very wise and educated man."

"Socrates is a bird," she said. She looked at the fire. "You also burn them."

"I do worse," the Dominie said. "On occasion I even drink them."

"You're daft," she said scornfully.

"I am no such thing."

"If you see a little black and white dog," she said, "that'll be Davy. I suppose if you saw Davy you wouldna take him back to me?"

"Indeed, I would."

"Thirza Gare," she said. "That's my name. Everybody kens me in the Fishertown. Jist speir at anybody an' they'll show you where I bide." She gave a brief farewell nod and stepped out on to the moor.

"Good-bye, Mistress Gare," the Dominie said.

The title was music in her ears. Its full impact struck her only after she had walked a few paces, and she stopped immediately and looked back over her shoulder to see if he was laughing at her. The Dominie was properly serious. He raised his arm in a stiff and uncertain valedictory gesture.

"You ken what they say in the Fishertown?" she enquired. "They say you steal dogs and sell them to the fleshers. That's what a' the bairns say."

"That's absurd," the Dominie said.

She nodded. She thought so too. The man was a queer crater, him an' his books, mad as a hatter, but quite harmless. Him steal dogs! He hidna the wit, puir chiel. And as for the rest—the cat, and the witches' brew, and the rest of it—lies. All lies!

Mistress Gare. *Mistress* Gare!

To tell the truth she had quite liked the man. It was a pity he was so queer in the head.

She dismissed the Daft Dominie from her mind and concentrated her thoughts on Davy. It was a fine clear February day, and as she swung along at a spanking pace towards the Fishertown her natural buoyancy returned and she had no difficulty in persuading herself that when she got home Davy would be waiting at the door for her.

"Sure as fate," she said hopefully.

But Davy wasn't there.

(3)

After days of fruitless hunting Thirza decided to enlist the aid of the Press in her search for Davy. She had a great respect for the Press as represented by the *Kaysie Advertiser*, the only section of it which she knew. When she was quite small she had discovered that on Fridays—Friday was market-day in Kaysie—one Mr. George Geekie, a farmer, an expansive man, was in the habit of mounting a rostrum on the Plainstones and thereon reading, with great gusto, extracts from the *Kaysie Advertiser* to all who cared to listen.

Mr. Geekie was not only a public-spirited man, he was also something of an orator and he had a very decided mind of his own. Where a lesser man would have been content merely to read from the paper, Mr. Geekie, before reading, would sell the subject to his audience with a few adroit and pithy home-made headlines. He remembered and made allowances for the fact that most of his listeners were illiterate. He never failed to paraphrase and explain the longer words, and if a passage was not perfectly clear he would declare, "What the birkie means to say is this," and put it into colourful and homely language that all could understand. "Not that I agree with him neces*sair*ily," he would say, and, scoring points by ramming his right fist into the palm of his left hand, he would proceed, with many an earthy phrase and mixed but telling metaphor, to develop the other side of the argument.

Thirza seldom missed a Friday morning at the Plainstones. Even as an infant she had listened avidly, and, though she understood little of what was said, she enjoyed the pantomime and the roll of Mr. Geekie's broad tongue. As she grew older she took an active part in the readings. She laughed heartily at Mr. Geekie's frequent jokes, and she said "Ay, ay," when he made a popular point. In particular she was impressed by the letters to the Editor. These letters dealt, for the most part, with matters of pressing local interest and were effective in securing minor reforms. Mr. Geekie took a pride in reminding his audience that this or that change had been brought about as a result of this or that letter which he, on some previous date, had read to them; and Thirza, absorbing every word as Gospel, naturally came to the conclusion that a letter to the Press was an all-powerful agent, capable of righting any wrong.

She decided to put a letter in the paper about Davy.

She went to Kaysie and inspected the *Advertiser* office, a small two-story building in the High Street. She walked backwards and forwards in front of the frosted-glass windows for half an hour, and at last summoned up the necessary courage and went in.

Inside, a boy was sitting at a long desk in the outer office. He was tying knots in a piece of string, and when he saw her he scowled and tied several knots at a great speed, one on top of the other.

"Well?" he demanded.

"I want to put a letter in the paper," she said.

He held out his hand.

Thirza stared.

"Where's the letter?"

"It's a letter to the editor," Thirza said.

"Where is it, then?"

"I haven't got it."

"You mad?" the boy enquired politely.

"No," Thirza said. She had thought that she would read the words out of her head, and that the editor would print them down in his paper, but she saw now that this was not the procedure. She would have to bring a letter.

"I'll go and get it," she said.

The boy tilted back his chair and made a gesture of hopeless resignation to the ceiling.

Thirza said, "I'll come back with the letter," and went out.

She stopped the first person she met—a man carrying a ladder.

"Where does a writer bide, please?" she asked.

"You mean a lawyer?"

"Does a lawyer write letters?"

"Surely."

"Well, a lawyer, then."

The man laid down his ladder and pointed out the Town Clerk's office. "They say he's a good lawyer," he said.

"But is he a good writer?" Thirza said.

"I dinna ken, lassie. Awa' an' speir!"

She went across to the Town Clerk's office, stated to two male clerks that she wished to see the Town Clerk on private business, and was directed to a bench in the passage. Half an hour later she was ushered

into the presence of James Harkness himself, Town Clerk of Kaysie.

James Harkness was an important and a busy man, and he was well aware of this. He wrote for several minutes before raising a dull and florid face to Thirza. He did not deign to speak, but in due course he permitted his eyebrows to arch enquiringly.

"Will you write a letter to the paper for me?" Thirza said. "Please. It's about my dog. Davy. He's lost. He's a little black and white mongrel the size o' your knees, and he's a good dog, an' I want you to put all that in the letter, an' that he belongs to me. I'm Thirza Gare, an' I live in the Fishertown. An' there's something else I want you to put in the letter too, about the dogs bitin' folks. It's the dogs the fleshers keep for makin' into buoys, that's the dogs that bite folks, on account of nobody has ever teached them dogs not to bite. Poor souls, they dinna ken any better. They're nae homy dogs at all, an' they've never learned to like folks; an' say in the letter that it's a' wrang to use dogs' skins for buoys; if this was stopped an' a' the fishers had to use big beasts' bladders for their buoys, there'd be nae mair dogs bitin' bairns."

She drew breath to continue, but the lawyer held up his hand. "That's enough," he said. "What did you say your name was?"

"Thirza Gare."

He picked up a quill and wrote several lines on a foolscap sheet.

"For good measure," he said, "you can even have the seal." And he stamped his signature with a large, imposing seal. He folded the sheet, addressed it, and fastened it with a wafer. "Take that to the editor," he said. "Don't thank me, just take it and go."

She ran back to the *Advertiser* office.

"Here's my letter," she said to the boy.

He glanced at it and jerked his head. "Upstairs," he said. "First door."

She raced up the stairs two at a time and knocked on the first door she saw. After several minutes a door opened a little farther along the corridor, a young man poked his head out, said, "No use knocking on that door. That's a lavatory," and closed the door again.

While she stood wondering which of several doors to tackle, the same door opened again and the same young man looked her over. "What do you want?" he asked.

"The editor."

"Do you want to see him personally?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm afraid you'll have to come back to-morrow. He's at a funeral in Macduff, and he won't be back till late. Is it important?"

"Very important," Thirza said.

"I'm the assistant editor," the young man said. He might equally well have said that he was the sub-editor, reporter, circulation manager, and compositor, but he liked best to say that he was assistant editor. "Perhaps I can be of service to you." And he held out his hand for the letter.

As he read it she watched him closely. "I want it to go in the paper to-morrow. You'll be sure to tell the editor, will you?"

"Come in," the young man said, frowning. He waved her to a seat. "Sit down. Now tell me exactly what you think this letter contains."

"It's about my dog, Davy." Thirza said.

He shook his head. "I'll read it to you. Listen. 'DEAR HARRY,'" he read. "'This girl's name is Thirza Gare, and she is a confounded nuisance. I advise you to send her about her business.'" He smiled. "You wouldn't like that in the paper, would you?"

"No," Thirza said, almost speechless.

"Suppose, then," the young man said, "you tell me what it is all about. How old are you to begin with?"

"I'm ten."

"All right, then," the young man said. He was a very kindly young man. His face radiated good humour, and his voice, though brisk, was friendly. He leaned forward and gave her his whole attention. "Now tell me about your dog."

Thirza told him what she had told the lawyer, only this time, encouraged by her listener's nods and sympathetic growls, she spoke at greater length. When she had finished the young man wrote the following letter:

"DEAR SIR,

"I wish to enlist the aid of your readers to discover a small black and white dog answering to the name of *Davy* who belongs to me and who has been lost since last Monday, the third of February.

"With regard to the recent tragic death from hydrophobia, I

would like to call your attention to the practice of using dogs' skins as buoys for herring-nets. Dogs are being bred for this purpose, and it is these dogs which tend to run stray and to worry children and livestock.

"Fishermen in general are agreed that bullocks' bladders make better buoys than dogs' skins, and it is altogether deplorable that dogs, who are man's best friends, should be treated in this barbarous way. The town's bounty for dogs' skins should be withdrawn, the fleshers' kennels closed, and the practice of using dogs' skins as buoys brought to an end. It is the responsibility, not only of the Town Council, but of every humane-minded man, woman, and child to work for this end, and to terminate an abuse which affronts the conscience and which has already resulted in one tragic death.

"I am, Sir,

"Yours truly,

"THIRZA GARE (aged 10)."

He read the letter. "Will that do?"

"Yes," Thirza said, pleased.

"Well, you can rest assured that I shall publish it if I possibly can. The only difficulty is that Harry probably won't like it, but —well, we'll do what we can."

"Who's Harry?" Thirza asked.

"Harry is the editor. He is an old man and inclined to be conservative. He is also a friend of Mr. Harkness, the Town Clerk, and Mr. Harkness is, of course, a friend of, or at least the agent of, Mr. Imlach, our worthy flesher. These little relationships are part and parcel of what is known as local politics and, I regret to say, are not very savoury. I mean to use up a considerable quantity of printer's ink on this same subject of local politics when I become editor."

There was something here in the last part of the last sentence which Thirza could understand.

"Are you going to be the editor?" she enquired.

"I hope so, some day."

He rose to precede her to the door, and she noted then for the first time that he wore an odd stub-toed boot on his left foot and that he limped slightly, jerking from the shoulder, as if one leg

was shorter than the other. As he opened the door he saw that she was looking at his foot, and a shadow moved across his face.

"Yes," he said. "I'm a cripple. Have been since childhood." And he tapped the deformed foot with studied casualness on the floor. "But I wager I could run faster than you, for all that."

As Thirza reached the bottom of the stairs she became aware that the young man was leaning over the banister rail, watching her.

"I think that was a very good letter you wrote," he shouted.

"I think so too," Thirza said.

And they both laughed.

When she got out in the street it occurred to her that she had liked that young man very much, and that she did not know his name. She returned to the outer office and asked the boy with the string.

"Him?" the boy said. "John MacPherson." And he made a lightning bowline. "Honest John, we call him."

Thirza stored that name.

(4)

In due course Thirza's letter appeared in the *Kaysie Advertiser* and aroused considerable local interest. Her name was already widely known in the Fishertown. Now it penetrated to Kaysie, was mentioned in the very best circles, and was publicly declaimed in the market-place by Mr. George Geekie.

In a few days the fuss over the letter died down, but Thirza's notoriety did not die with it, for less than a week after the publication of the letter she was involved in another incident which gave rise to a veritable spate of gossip and which, to use a local idiom, fairly rattled the tea-cups.

It occurred at the Soup Kitchen, where Thirza found herself face to face with Janet Carmichael.

There was no avoiding the meeting. Thirza reached the head of the queue just as Janet stepped out of the background to relieve the lady with the ladle. Thirza coloured, fixed her eyes on the ground, and held out her platter.

"Why Thirza!" Janet Carmichael said. "It *is* Thirza isn't it? Of course it is; how nice to see you!" And she smiled briefly over her shoulder to Lady Greenskyres who, as Fate would have it, had decided on this particular morning to grace the kitchen with her

presence. "A fisher child whom I have befriended," she explained. "And did you get those lovely clothes I sent you, dear? I rather expected you to write and tell me that you had got them. You did get them, didn't you, Thirza?"

"Yes," Thirza said.

"And did you like them?"

"No," Thirza said.

There was a pained, embarrassed silence.

"Come, Thirza," Mistress Carmichael said, "I don't understand you, child. Those were very special clothes. I selected them with my own hands, and it is inconceivable that you should not have liked them. Explain yourself."

Thirza stood with bowed head. She was wretchedly unhappy. She had slept very little since Davy's disappearance, and her nerves were tight-drawn and ready to snap. One of her legs began to tremble, and the trembling spread to include all her limbs. She shook uncontrollably. She felt that at any moment she might dissolve into a flood of tears, and she fixed her eyes sullenly on one of her bare feet and stared unseeingly at it.

"I insist that you explain," Janet Carmichael said. "Do you hear me? I insist."

"I wouldna wear such clothes," Thirza said, goaded beyond endurance. "They were the clothes of Jezebel, and, what's mair, they were rags. I threw them in the dump."

At that moment her revenge was complete. Everyone, that is, everyone who was anyone, had heard. But Thirza savoured none of the sweetness of revenge. She wanted only to be allowed to crawl away in peace, to hide her hot face and trembling limbs. She wilted before the storm that, after a moment's quiet, broke from all directions on her head. But when the squall of indignant female voices had at last subsided, she still stood there, bent like a heavy-headed flower and as unyieldingly rooted.

"And what are you waiting for?" a voice said coldly.

"I want my soup," Thirza said.

(5)

Twelve days after his mysterious disappearance Davy, as mysteriously, returned home. He arrived on the same day as the Aberdeen

sloop *Clara Gill,* and, presumably, came off her. Thirza made no enquiries. She did not care where he had been or how he had returned. It was enough that he was home. She bolted the door to ensure that he did not get away again, and spent the whole morning fussing over him, alternately petting and scolding.

In the afternoon she put on her best dress, fastened her mother's garnet brooch at her neck, and, leading Davy on a length of rope, set out to pay a visit. She had had this visit in mind for some days, and Davy's return had now provided her with a perfect excuse to make it.

She would go to the Daft Dominie and tell him that Davy had returned, and then, having justified the call, she would make her proposition.

With Davy trotting meekly at her heels she crossed the Brig, marched through Kaysie, and set out across the moorland. She was very happy. She skipped and sang. She rolled Davy in the heather and fed him with sugar from her pocket. For the time being she was a gay and irresponsible child, but as she neared the Dominie's house she sobered and proceeded with the circumspection fitting to *Mistress* Gare. She rehearsed her speech.

She noted that there was no smoke issuing from the hole in the bothy roof. Well, if he wasn't in, so much the better. She would tidy the place and wait for him, and when he saw how very neat and trim she had made his house he would no doubt be very pleased, and that would be just the time to make her suggestion to him.

She knocked on the door. When she knocked, the door swung open and Davy barked.

"Quiet!" she said. "There's naebody there." She raised her voice and called "Dominie!" She called several times. There was no answer. She shortened Davy's rope by coiling it round her hand and dragged him over the threshold.

She saw the Daft Dominie immediately, and her mouth opened in a soundless gasp. He was lying face up on the bed, fully clothed, his body twisted, and his arms spread-eagled. She stood staring for a moment, then she edged forward till she stood beside the bed.

Davy growled. His fur bristled.

She bent forward and clasped the Dominie's hand. "Dominie," she said. "Dominie!" When she let go of his hand his arm slithered limply down the side of the bed. She wheeled abruptly, and,

dragging Davy and stumbling in the litter of books, made for the door. Outside, she took to her heels, cast one last scared glance over her shoulder at the bothy, and fled back to Kaysie.

She went to the doctor's, panted out her story to the housekeeper, was told to tie Davy to a tree in the garden, and, having done so, was shown into the waiting-room. In due course she saw the doctor himself. He listened without interest, looking out of the window, his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets. When she had finished he took out his watch and looked at it gravely.

"The gentleman in question," he said, "is suffering from malnutrition and alcoholic poisoning. There is naething a doctor can do. If he was a rich man I would go an' see him twice a week, prescribe unpleasant medicines that would do him nae good, an' send him large and exorbitant bills. But Mr. Christie is nae a rich man. He never pays the tradesmen, let alone the doctor, an' so I dinna propose to waste my time traipsin' across the moor to him." He replaced his watch in his pocket. "Time," he said, "is a valuable commodity. Shut the door as you go out."

Thirza recovered Davy and ran down to the Low Street. She had now little hope of bringing help to the Dominie, but she had still one last string to her bow.

The Minister.

She found him flushed with sleep in his chair by the fire, and told him the whole pitiful story.

"There's naething wrang with the man," the Minister said.

"He smells awful ill," she argued.

The Minister yawned and smiled.

"Lassie," he said. "He's just drunk, that's a'."

The following day Thirza, somewhat chastened, returned to the Dominie's cottage bearing a pail of soup. She found him cheerful and unabashed, and, laying her pail on the table, she came straight to the point.

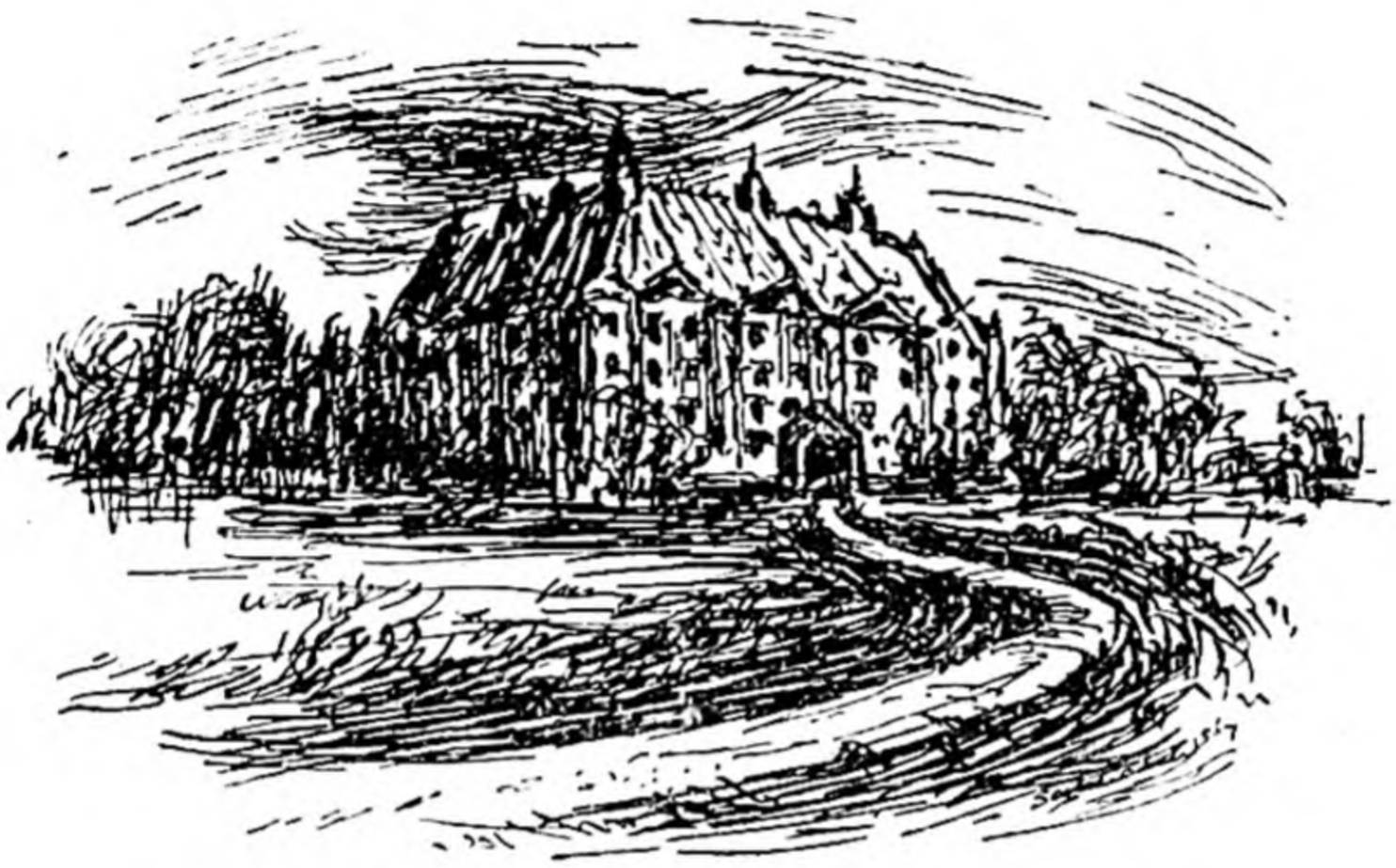
"I'm goin' to come an' red up your place and make it tidy two days a week," she said, "if you'll learn me to read an' write good."

The Dominie was eyeing her pail.

"Will you? It has to be good," she said.

"Yes," the Dominie said. He picked up the pail and took a long untidy draught of the soup.

BOOK II



CHAPTER I

(1)

ON THIRZA'S FOURTEENTH BIRTHDAY HER father gave her a two-shilling piece for herself and, having thus paved the way, broke the news that he planned to marry again. The prospective bride was a widow in Portknockie, Alexander Gare's home town, and she was something of a catch, for she had a stone-built house, close on £100 in the bank, and a nice plump figure.

In order to enjoy all three of these amenities, Alexander Gare intended to move along the coast to Portknockie, and the question immediately arose: what was to be done with Thirza?

In due course the widow, Mary Belle by name, a sonsy little body with doll-like red cheeks and merry eyes, came down from Portknockie to meet (inspect) Thirza, and, after only a very little humming and hawing, announced that she approved of her stepdaughter and was willing to give her a home. Thirza declined the offer. She liked Mary Belle, but she did not like the idea of her father taking another wife, and she very much disliked the idea of going to live with a stepmother.

"I'll stick to Kaysie," she said.

"You'd get a room on your ain at Portknockie," her father said. "Wouldn't she, missus?"

"You would that," Mary Belle said. "You'd like it fine up bye, wi' us. There'd be nae bullragging' or threepin' at ye, an' I ken fine ye'd be weel pleased. Ye jist had better come, Thirza."

"No," Thirza said. "I canna."

It was impossible to explain. She knew exactly why she could not leave Kaysie, but she did not know how to put the explanation into words that Mary Belle would understand. If she were to leave Kaysie she would also have to leave the Daft Dominie, and her lessons with the Daft Dominie now meant more to her than anything in life. She could already read as fast as her eye could move, she was an accomplished arithmetician, and she was soon to start on

geometry. It was unthinkable that she should throw away this chance—the only chance that she would ever have—of being properly educated. Yet how was she to explain this to Mary Belle, who had not herself been educated and who could not be expected to understand what education could mean to a girl?

"Why can't ye come?" Mary Belle persisted.

"Well," she said helplessly. "There's the Dominie."

"The Dominie. Fitina Dominie is that?"

"Mind, I telt ye," her father said. "It's her eddication she's on aboot. This Dominie gars her read an' write an' talk the Latin, and she's makin' progress and fair ta'en wi' it."

"Eh me!" Mary Belle said. "Latin! Weel, I nivver!" And she stared at Thirza with round, popping eyes. "And you only thirteen!"

"Fourteen last week," Thirza said.

Mary Belle was perplexed. She didn't really want to start her married life with a stepdaughter in the house, but she was anxious to do what was right. She dismissed all this incomprehensible talk of Latin and such-like things with a shake of her head, and said to Alexander, "Well, if she's to bide here, fits she to dee?"

"You see," Alexander Gare said, forced now to tell Thirza what he had been afraid to tell her before. "I had in mind to sell the hoosie, Thirza."

"You maun sell it," Mary Belle said. "I thocht that was settled. Mercy, we canna bide in twa hooses. Forbyes, the siller'll come in handy for the flittin'. There's naething else for'it. Thirza had jist better come wi' us."

Thirza shook her head. She felt a cold draught of unhappiness at the thought of being homeless, but she also felt her first twinge of resentment against Mary Belle, and she was more determined than ever to be independent.

"But if ye dinna come wi' us, fit'll ye dee?" Mary Bell demanded.

"I'm going to a place," she said impulsively. The words hung in the air between Mary Belle and herself, and she thought about them then, and saw Mary Belle thinking about them too. "That is, if you'll do just one thing for me," she added. "If you'll tak' Davy."

"The dog," her father explained.

"Oh, the doggie," Mary Belle said. "I'll tak' the doggie. The wee man. Heth ay, surely. So you're for aff into service, are ye?"

Thirza nodded, thinking of Davy, and for the moment not trusting herself to speak.

"Well noo," Mary Belle said, cautiously, "that micht be a richt guid idea, sae it micht. That is if'n ye got a nice place, like."

"I've got a very nice place," Thirza said. She pointed her voice at her father, who could be expected to understand what a very nice place it was. "With the Carmichaels o' Carmichael Hoose," she said. "It's all arranged."

And that same afternoon, in order that it should not be a lie, she went to Carmichael House, and, having made abject apologies to Mistress Carmichael, duly arranged it.

On October 18, 1857, two days before her father's wedding, she took up her duties at Carmichael House as probationary lady's-maid to Miss Susan.

(2)

At first it was all very confusing.

She did not know what to do except when she was told precisely, and even then she often did not know how to do it. She got lost in the corridors, confused the rooms, muddled the servants' names, botched two out of every three errands. She felt very awkward and unhappy. She was for ever being put right, and she hated that above all else, and set to with a grim and almost savage determination to learn her new job and put herself beyond reproach.

Her main duty was to wait on Miss Susan, and this in itself was not difficult, for Susan was the least exacting of mistresses. Susan was seventeen now and very beautiful in the fashionable, blonde, fragile way that went so well with the crinoline. She was petite and dainty, with her mother's features and colouring, and a disposition all her own. Although she now had the status of a young lady and was allowed to take dinner downstairs and put perfume behind her ears, she had not yet grown up and probably never would. The simplest things delighted her. She would play happily for a whole morning with a kitten, and if she received an unexpected compliment—from her father, for instance—she would smile for the rest of the day. She had a lovely smile, as guileless as a baby's, and her

mouth, even in repose, never quirked down at the corners the way her mother's sometimes did. Her eyes were the indeterminate brown-blue colour usually called violet, and were very, very gentle. You had only to look once into those eyes to be sure that the girl who owned them had never had an uncharitable thought in her life, and it was only if you were yourself an uncharitable person that you might also begin to wonder if she had ever had any kind of thought at all.

Thirza succumbed at once to Susan's beauty. Now that she was separated from Davy, she needed something or somebody to love, and Susan served admirably. They delighted in each other's company, and would have been very happy if only they had been left alone.

It was not often that they were left alone, however.

Mademoiselle Laroche, Mistress Carmichael's own lady's-maid, was given strict orders to take Thirza Gare under her wing, to watch her carefully, and to train her; and M'selle, a martinet, carried out her instructions to the letter. At any moment, usually when the girls were least expecting it, the door of Susan's room would open, and, with a crisp rustling of taffeta petticoats, M'selle would be upon them. Woe betide Thirza then if a single ribbon was loose or a wisp of hair out of place.

M'selle was a lady's-maid of the old school. An Austrian by birth, she allowed herself to be considered French for reasons of gentility. She was (she said) thirty-nine years of age, and had been in service in stately homes all over Europe. She was an authority on etiquette, and knew what was what in half a dozen languages. She believed uncompromisingly in Discipline, Propriety, and the Aristocracy. She was a very great snob and proud of it, and in the housekeeper's room she made no bones of the fact that she did not think that a girl with Gare's background could ever be groomed into a lady's-maid. She prided herself on being scrupulously fair, however, and when Mistress Carmichael asked her opinion of Thirza, she did not give all of it. She merely said, "A cart-horse, madame."

"Can you train her?" Janet Carmichael wanted to know.

"I can try, madame," M'selle said.

She tried very hard.

"In order to be a lady's-maid," she would say to Thirza in her

clipped, precise tones, "one must first be a lady. And in order to be a complete lady's-maid, like me, one must be more ladylike than any lady. Now walk the border of the carpet again, and this time remain motionless from the waist up. Place each foot directly in front of the other on the red line, and try to remember, if you please, that you are a lady's-maid, and not a mariner."

Thirza had never met anyone so knowledgeable. She admired M'selle as much as she disliked her, and tried very hard to please her. She regarded the lady's-maid's lightest word as law, and went to absurd lengths to obey it. When, for instance, M'selle pointed out that a lady should always be conscious of the lower limbs and should walk in such a way that her pantaloon legs brushed together at each step, Thirza took the stricture so much to heart and tried so hard to regulate her legs correctly that her knees knocked audibly as she walked and their insides became inflamed and sore.

The Daft Dominie reproved her gently for these aspirations to gentility. He thought little of the conventions of polite society, and was so uncouth as to believe that a man—and a woman too—should walk in the manner that came easiest.

"For instance," he argued, "suppose you have a lady who is born bandy-legged. What about your knocking knees then?"

Thirza was not to be taken in by such sophistry as this.

"There is no such thing," she said coldly, "as a *lady* with bandy legs."

Living in the servants' quarters at Carmichael House, Thirza soon came to accept the standards of this rarefied little world. Taking her cue from M'selle, she began to adopt small airs and graces. She became genteel. She so suborned her natural instincts that one evening when a mouse appeared in the housekeeper's room she was able to get up on a chair and scream with the best of them. For the time being she desired above all else to become a good lady's-maid, and she aimed herself as unequivocally as an arrow at this one target. She lived for her work. She applied her mind consciously to every aspect of existence. Each time she sat down or stood up, or entered or left a room, or even spoke or smiled, she paused and thought carefully, "Is this correct? Is there not some other correcter way of doing this thing?"

She knew now that it was essential to be correct.

"If you are correct," M'selle had said, "you will *appear* natural, and when you appear natural and at ease under all circumstances—without, of course, ever *being* natural—then, Gare, you will be a lady."

"I shall be a very slow lady," Thirza had said.

"Yes," M'selle said. "I have always feared that you will, but one does not judge a lady by her velocity."

It sometimes seemed to Thirza that anyone could, with patience and perseverance, learn to be a lady. A lady's-maid, however, was a very different matter. . . .

M'selle had a blunt way of putting it.

"One either has the qualities," she said, "or one has not."

"And have I?" Thirza forced herself to enquire.

M'selle shrugged her shoulders in the continental manner. Gare had improved on knowing. She had certainly the makings of a lady's-maid. Her needlework was admirable, and she had a real aptitude for hairdressing. But—and it was a big but—she had one serious fault. *She was not perfectly respectful.*

Take her attitude to Madame's migraines, for instance.

When Madame had one of her migraines—and she frequently had one—there was nothing she liked better than to have her hair brushed. She would lie back on the special chaise-longue with the adjustable headpiece, her eyes closed, an eau-de-Cologne poultice on her brow, and her hair loose on a satin cushion. And she would say simply, "Brush me," and her lady's-maid would brush and brush and brush her hair, sometimes for as long as three hours at a time, while Madame moaned with pain or sighed with ecstasy or even fell asleep. When M'selle's arm became stiff she would flutter her eyelashes in a prearranged manner, and it was then Thirza's duty to step forward and relieve her on the hairbrush. M'selle could not but notice, as she discreetly limbered her tired arm, that the new maid's soul was not in her work. Thirza wielded the hair-brush firmly and competently, but quite without reverence. She did the job, but gave no extras. She did not rearrange Madame's poultice or caress Madame's scalp with her finger-tips, and it seemed to M'selle that she never bothered to conceal that she herself was in excellent health and more than a little bored with the whole pro-ceedings.

Even at a time of crisis, say, when Madame was being dressed for a ball, Thirza remained conspicuously calm. No matter how impatiently Madame clapped her hands for assistance, no matter how many toilet articles and small services she might simultaneously demand, Thirza did not allow herself to become hazed or flustered. She was far too methodical. She fetched what was necessary, did whatever was required of her, but she never showed a trace of the flattering flutter which is expected of a lady's-maid. Watching her critically, one could not help coming to the conclusion that she had thoughts of her own, and that she did not wholly identify herself with her mistress's alarms and agitations. One was inclined almost to suspect that she did not care. . . .

Such misbehaviour could not be allowed to go unchecked.

M'selle said pointedly one day, after a particularly tiresome toilette, "It is necessary not only to adore one's mistress, but to show it."

"I am very fond of Miss Susan," Thirza said.

"And Madame?"

"Madame is . . . very kind," Thirza said, looking down her cheeks.

"Very kind! Madame is lovely, gracious, elegant—enchanting. And, in addition—please to remember—it is Madame who pays the money."

This was irrefutable. It was certainly Mistress Carmichael who, through Manson, her housekeeper, paid Thirza her salary of three shillings and fourpence a month. Yes, Madame paid the money. But all the money in the world could not now have persuaded Thirza to fawn upon her mistress. She had once liked Janet Carmichael too well and trusted her too much. Now she neither liked nor trusted her, and could not force herself to pretend to.

(3)

Thirza soon learned that life in Carmichael House was sharply divided into two parts, each quite separate from the other, and each regulated by a rigid set of rules. There was the upstairs life, and that was your life with the family, and naturally it was something of a strain, for you had to be on your best behaviour every minute of the time; and then there was the downstairs life, which you

shared with the other servants, and which, though at first you could hardly believe it, had all the stiffness and starchiness of the upstairs life, and other faults of its own as well.

There was never any chance, either upstairs or downstairs, of letting your hair down and being a person for a change. The only time you were Thirza Gare was when you got into bed. For all the rest of the time you were the probationary lady's-maid.

It was the same with the other servants. Nobody ever seemed to become human. Nobody ever stopped being what he or she was upstairs. If you were a housemaid upstairs, you were still a housemaid downstairs. And if you were a lady's-maid, you were even more of a lady's-maid downstairs than you were up, for downstairs a lady's-maid was a person of some consequence. She ranked with the valet and took precedence of all save the housekeeper and the butler. She was of the élite, and must find her friends among them.

The upper hierarchy of servants—housekeeper, butler, lady's-maids, and valet—gathered at meal times in the housekeeper's dining-room. This was a high room decorated in the height of good taste, with elaborate mouldings of laurel and acanthus, and exuberant clusters of juicy cherubs in bas-relief. It was furnished in dark oak after the style of the later Empire period, with monstrous baroque pieces and massive rococo ornaments. The dining-table was the *pièce de résistance*. It opened out like an accordion and, when fully extended, stretched to no less than fourteen feet. It was a noble article of furniture, but not very convenient. It had a bewildering number of legs, and, if you did not open it out to its full length, its legs were always where you wanted yours to be.

Manson, the housekeeper, presided at one end of this contraption, and Mr. Sinclair, the butler, vice-presided at the other end, which Thirza had once—but once only—been innocent enough to call the "foot" of the table. M'selle had one whole side to herself, and Thirza sat opposite M'selle, alongside—but at double arm's length from—Spence, Mr. Carmichael's valet. This was the entire company, and it was waited upon—very efficiently—by Jessie, the still-room maid.

At first, each meal was an ordeal, for M'selle brought upstairs down with her and supervised Thirza's table manners with all her upstairs asperity. It was *don't this* and *don't that,* and *please to this*

and *please to that* till Thirza was in a hot, red welter of confusion, staring at her plate with smarting eyes, and often incapable even of distinguishing her right hand from her left.

At dinner one evening towards the end of this first unhappy week, Manson intervened. She raised her coarse, red face from her soup-plate, and, speaking across her spoon, said, "Leave the bairn be."

"Are you addressing me?" M'selle enquired.

"Ay."

"But the child has to be instructed. I would be failing in my duty to Madame if I did not check and correct her. See how she employs that spoon. Like a spade, I declare. Lay down your spoon at once, Gare, and pick it up properly. No, no, with the first finger underneath. Thumb up. Up! Now, slowly, tilt the plate. Look at her, Mr. Spence. Regard the spread of her fingers. Did you ever in all your experience see such vulgarity in a lady's-maid?"

Mr. Spence shuttled his eyes brightly in Thirza's direction, but did not reply. He was a thin, worried little man, as unobtrusive as a shadow, and almost as quiet. He rarely spoke even when spoken to, and when he did break his silence it was only to make some small factual statement about Mr. Carmichael, whom he called "he." "He's going shooting this afternoon," he would say. Or: "He's taken a notion for a castor-oil pomade to-night." Such matters entirely occupied his mind. He ate stealthily, unnoticed and unnoticing, looking into the middle distance and frowning at what he saw there. The moment the post-prandial grace was said, he got up like a nervous rabbit and bolted upstairs to resume his own important activities. It would have been a great surprise if he had replied to M'selle's question, and she did not even pause to give him the chance.

"Now square your shoulders, Gare," she continued briskly. "Don't droop, and keep your stomach in. And take your left hand out of your soup. You need only touch your plate with the tips of your fingers—thus—to tilt it. Correct. Now proceed."

Manson moved in her chair. "M'selle," she said. "I said, leave the bairn be."

"I don't think you understand," M'selle said, loosing a faint, cold smile. "It is my responsibility to train Gare. I have explicit instruc-

tions from Madame, and, naturally, I must obey them. Gare has to learn manners. She has to learn to behave like a civilised human being. It is necessary. It may not be necessary in your opinion"—she shot a swift glance at Mr. Sinclair, and their eyes exchanged a gleam of malice—"but, then, you have never been a lady's-maid and perhaps do not know—fully appreciate—how important a part table etiquette plays in the life of a *lady*."

"When I was with Lord Harpington," Mr. Sinclair said, speaking in the soft high voice which was so alarming in a man of his vast dimensions and drawing his napkin deftly across his rosebud of a mouth. "When I was with Lord Harpington, we had at one time in our employment a lady's-maid by the name of Grenfell. . . ."

"Yes, yes," Manson said. "Yes, yes, Mr. Sinclair, but afore ye start on your reminiscences I'll tak' a word wi' M'selle here. I dinna like your way o' speakin', M'selle. I dinna like your way o' speakin' to me, and I dinna like your way o' speakin' to the lassie, and I'll thank you to mend baith. The lassie's flummoxed. You've got her giddy as a goose with a' your *dos* and *don'ts,* and she disna ken whether she's comin' or goin'. She's a bright lassie, and she's got a smart enough pair o' eyes in her heid. You let her be, and she'll soon learn what to dae and what nae to dae. We've had enough an' to spare o' the rough side o' your tongue. We'll hae nae mair o't, and nae mair o' this clapperclawin' and fault-findin' at table. . . ."

"The girl has to be corrected," M'selle said icily.

"Quite right," Mr. Sinclair said. "Mademoiselle"—he pronounced it beautifully—"is quite right. Girl's slovenly."

"Well, if she has to be corrected, I shall do it myself," Manson said. "Now let that be an end to it. Eat your soup, bairn, and stop gogglin'."

(4)

This was the first sign Thirza saw of the division of forces in Carmichael House, and it was not till much later, when she had been absorbed into the system, that she realised that the whole household was split from top to bottom into two opposing factions. She never did learn the full history of the conflict, but, as far as she could gather, Mr. Sinclair, the butler, was at the root of the trouble.

Mr. Sinclair was a man of considerable presence. He was very tall

and very well-built. This was Mr. Sinclair's own description of Mr. Sinclair, and was conveyed in such remarks as, "Lord Harpington is, like myself, a very tall and well-built gentleman." When Thirza met the butler for the first time, she had thought him a big fat bull of a man, but after a few days in Mr. Sinclair's company she came to accept Mr. Sinclair at Mr. Sinclair's own valuation, and, describing him to the Daft Dominie, spoke in hushed, respectful tones, and dutifully declared him to be "a very well-built gentleman."

In fact, Mr. Sinclair stood five feet ten inches from the ground, and weighed close on nineteen stones. He was completely bald from the ears up. What hair he had was the tawny, faded colour of under-arm hair, and, growing only on the upper reaches of his neck, emphasised the obscene look of that great bullock-bladder of a head. His eyes, blinkered by swellings of taut, pink flesh, were small, blue, and agile. His mouth was uncommonly prim, and he had an indeterminate number of soft smiling chins. He looked a good-natured, jovial fellow whom you just happened to have found out of sorts. Next time you saw him you felt sure he would be his jolly, friendly self. But he never was. He was jealous, ambitious, energetic, and petty. He was, according to Mr. Carmichael, "the perfect butler, or near as dammit."

Mr. Sinclair was a new-comer to Carmichael House. He had made an immediate impression on Mr. Carmichael, and, sure of his master's support, had proceeded to show his teeth. He reorganised his entire department. He introduced a new high standard of efficiency and a new disturbing tension, and, regarding both with satisfaction, turned his attention to the distaff side of the house, which was not his affair. He had come from a small bachelor household where he had performed the offices of both butler and housekeeper, and he was not now prepared to play second fiddle to a woman. He affected not to recognise Manson's status or authority. He interfered blandly and deliberately with all her arrangements, forced the cook to give notice, and delighted in nagging the maids to tears. Soon butler and housekeeper were at daggers drawn, and the household divided into lines behind them.

This was the state of affairs when Thirza took up her duties at Carmichael House.

(5)

The friendship between Thirza and Manson, born that day at the housekeeper's table, was quick to grow, and it soon became Thirza's custom and delight to spend part of her afternoon with Manson in the housekeeper's private sitting-room. While M'selle's attention was fully engaged in the elaborate task of getting Mistress Carmichael to bed for her afternoon nap, Thirza would tuck Miss Susan in with all despatch and rush down to the housekeeper's room to ask breathlessly if Manson had a use for her.

"Bless my soul, I should think so," Manson would say. "Come right in." She could always think up a useful job for Thirza, but once Thirza was safely established in her favourite little rosewood arm-chair by the fire, work became a pretence, and the real business of the afternoon was to talk. Thirza did most of it. With everyone else—with Mistress Carmichael, Susan, M'selle, and the Daft Dominie—she was expected only to listen, and she found it very pleasant to do the talking for a change. She would lapse happily into the Kaysie dialect, which neither M'selle nor the Daft Dominie now allowed her to use, and, encouraged by Manson's obvious approval, clake to her heart's content. She talked with increasing fluency on every subject under the sun, sitting hunched on the edge of her chair, her face pushed forward and fixed in a look of rapt concentration, while the housekeeper, listening to the child's quaint humour and plausible arguments, slapped her plump knees and laughed aloud, as delighted as an organ-grinder with a clever monkey.

They made a strange pair—the fat, worldly-wise, middle-aged woman with her gross, humorous face, and sloppy, ill-supported figure, and the sober, keen-faced child, neat as a fashion-plate in frilled lace cap and apron. You would have thought they had nothing in common, yet from the first they felt some strange bond of union. Thirza admired Manson for her earthy philosophy and her encyclopædic knowledge of household affairs, and Manson, perceiving something of Thirza's quality, thought of her as the daughter she would have liked to have had, and loved the child for her naïve enthusiasms and for the fine, sharp quality of her mind. They were bound by an affection which neither of them ever quite understood, but which was to last unimpaired for the rest of their lives.

(6)

Thirza had been some months in Carmichael House before she discovered the Library.

The Library was in the west wing, and the west wing belonged exclusively to Mr. Carmichael. Here he had his office, his den, his gun-room, his new miniature rifle-range, his billiard-room—and his Library. To Thirza, the west wing was an alien and mysterious territory, populated during the day by strangers on business from the outside world, and given over, by night, to sinister masculine rites. When you crossed the main hall you were always aware of the corridor that served the west wing, and as you walked swiftly past it you might sometimes see a shadow move across a slit of light from an open door, hear a strange metallic clicking or a blood-curdling guffaw, and catch a whiff of the cigar smoke which filtered out into the main hall as an exotic aroma, but which soon changed to a stale fug and had to be whisked and brushed and beaten out of the hall each morning by the maids.

It would never have occurred to Thirza to venture into the west wing if she had not been sent by Mistress Carmichael to tell Spence to ask Mr. Carmichael (who was due to drive to Kaysie that afternoon) kindly to tell MacGregor (the coachman) to go into Reid & Reid's, the goldsmiths', and bring back the mistress's French boudoir clock. Armed with this elaborate errand and further protected by the light of a bright spring day, Thirza penetrated boldly into the west wing. She knocked on the doors in turn and, getting no reply, opened the last of them. It was the Library door.

As she stood, bewildered, on the threshold, she heard the familiar skitter-clop of the mare's hooves on gravel, and her eyes darted at once to the big french windows. She caught a glimpse of the chaise as it passed a gap in the rhododendrons at the far side of the lawn, and then, a moment later, she saw it plainly as it swung briskly round the corner of the drive and disappeared behind the chestnut trees. She waited till the sound had died away, and then, knowing she was safe, drew a deep breath and stepped into the room.

The Library was rectangular in shape, and the two long walls were lined, ceiling high, with bookshelves. A series of double-fronted mahogany cases, with books back and front, projected at

right angles from the walls to divide the room into bays, each big enough to hold a pair of horses. There were books everywhere—books of every kind and colour—books bound in calf and pigskin and morocco and modern buckram; books in paper boards and glazed calico; even books bound in velvet and satin, although she did not discover them, in their broad dwarf window case, until later.

Thirza walked twice round the room, pausing before the open fireplace and the brass Napoleon andirons, noting the inlaid mahogany writing-table with its delicate fluted legs and the deep arm-chairs in nigger leather, and then she trained her eyes along the rows of books again and stood gaping and bewildered. She had never felt so ignorant.

She took a book from the nearest shelf and turned it gently in her hands. It was of dark-blue morocco, with gold-tooled borders and a diamond-shaped centre-piece. She opened it, caressed its printed page with a finger-tip, held it to her nose to savour its musty, processed smell, closed it, and put it reverently back in its place. She had not read a word of it. . . .

Some time later she left the Library in a daze, passed Spence without noticing in the hall, and had to turn back to convey her message.

"What a to-do!" Spence said. "What a to-do now! And he's been gone for half an hour."

"Oh, well," she said vaguely. "I don't suppose it matters." She took a couple of steps, stopped, and looked back over her shoulder. "Did you say half an hour?" she asked incredulously. "Did you, Mr. Spence?"

"Yes, he's been gone about half an hour, I would say."

"Mercy!" Thirza said, and, lifting her skirts, whirled and dashed upstairs at a speed that M'selle would have thought very vulgar.

(7)

Thirza did not venture back to the west wing until some days later, but in the interval she thought constantly about the Library, and devised a grandiose educational scheme. She intended to start at the end nearest the door and work through the books, shelf by shelf, till she had read every single one of them.

She asked Susan how many books she thought there were in the

Library, but Susan was not very helpful. She was having her breakfast in bed at the time, and Thirza, with an ear cocked for M'selle, was sitting, most improperly, on the edge of the bed.

"In Father's Library?" Susan said, frowning slightly because the question was so unusual. "I'm sure I don't know."

"There must be thousands," Thirza said, day-dreaming.

"Yes, I suppose so. Thirza, do you think it would be better if we took the rosebud trimmings off that new green dress and put bead ones on instead? I don't think that rosebuds are very fashionable just now, do you, and the new beads in the top drawer are really very pretty. Which reminds me. Is my *jabot* back from the wash?"

"I think so," Thirza said. "Yes, I'm sure it is. I mean, it didn't go to the wash. I washed it and ironed it myself. I suppose you read most of these books when *you* were being educated?"

"Books!" Susan said, startled. "What *are* you talking about? What books?'

"In the Library. You didn't read them all, did you, Miss Susan?"

"No, of course not."

"How many did you read?"

"I don't think I ever read a single book out of the Library," Susan said. "I don't think they'd be very interesting books, being Father's."

"But surely you read some of them? Surely your governess made you read them?"

"Old Blackie, of course she didn't. Why should you think that anybody would read the books in Father's Library? You *are* a queer child, Thirza." She smiled affectionately. "Now, about my *jabot*. . . ."

Thirza began to visit the Library, at first with the utmost caution, and then, finding that no one else ever used it, with increasing boldness. She was never rash, however. She kept a close watch on Mr. Carmichael's movements, interrogating Spence craftily at the table. She was now accepted as a member of the household and could speak at table, though not as much as she would have liked, and not of course on matters of opinion. She would present her full face to Mr. Spence so that he could not but be aware that she was addressing him, and she would say, "I saw the groom putting an extra polish on the chaise this morning. Mr.

Carmichael must surely be going to Kaysie?" or, "Is Mr. Carmichael to be shooting in the West Wood, or is he going over the hill this afternoon, Mr. Spence?"

This was the sort of question which Mr. Spence was prepared to hear and answer, and he kept her well-informed of his master's programme. Occasionally Mr. Carmichael was away for days at a time, and then Thirza would regard the Library as her own, stalking its parquet floor with a firm proprietary tread, or curling up cosily with a book in one of the big arm-chairs.

It was in this attitude, her feet up and concealed in her skirts, her back supported by a careless pile of cushions, that Robert Carmichael discovered her. Engrossed in her book, she did not hear the door open, and did not know there was anyone in the room until Robert spoke from within a few feet of her.

"Evening," he said politely.

Her heart leapt for the chandeliers, and her eyes lifted in horror to him.

Robert was now a man, and had down on his upper lip to prove it. He was tall and flat-backed, with high, square, brittle shoulders which he carried with a swagger. His brow was lofty, and his eyes were dark and arrogant like his father's, but the lower part of his face had come from his mother, and the small mouth and round dimpled chin which suited Janet Carmichael so well were somewhat incongruous in her son. Thirza was later to think that he was weak and foppish-looking, but at this time she regarded him as a very beautiful young man. She knew him only by his reputation, which was formidable. According to the information which she had picked up downstairs, Master Robert was brilliantly clever, as lah-di-dah as an Englishman, and treated you like dirt. Among the servants, he was by far the least popular of all the Carmichaels, and if Thirza had had any choice in the matter, she would have chosen to be found out by anyone rather than by Robert. Yes, even by Mr. Carmichael himself. . . .

She sat rigid, staring up at him without blinking or breathing, momentarily fascinated, like a rabbit fixed before a snake.

"Good book?" Robert enquired.

She came to then, and made a wild, flapping scramble to rise. She was in too much of a hurry. Her left foot caught in her under-

most petticoat, and her book crashed like an ill-treated thing to the floor. For a moment it seemed that she must fall off the chair head first, but she flailed desperately with her arms and somehow regained her balance. Still in a panic, she took stock of her position, and found that her foot was firmly jammed in a tear in her petticoat. While she struggled to free her foot and at the same time to cover every particle of self with her skirt, Robert said, "Don't get up," and himself bent down to retrieve her book. "By jove! *Memoirs of the Reign of George II.* I wouldn't have thought that you could have read this sort of thing. Heavy going, isn't it?" He looked at her closely. "What's the matter with you?"

"I'm stuck," Thirza whispered.

"You don't look stuck."

She was sitting bolt upright now, cross-legged like a Buddha.

"It's my foot."

"Well," Robert said. "You'd better unstick it. You're Gare, aren't you? Susan's maid."

"Yes, sir."

"I thought you were; but I must say you've changed since the days when you used to be a fisher brat and come begging. *Memoirs of the Second George.* Damme, this couldn't happen in a play!"

"I never came begging yet," Thirza said. "Never. Here or anywhere." And, angry, she lashed out regardless. She felt and heard the material rip, but for the moment did not care. All that mattered was that she was free. She jumped to her feet, and it was only then that she realised how well and truly she was caught, for her cuffs lay on a chair behind Robert and her white-satin boots—a gift from Susan—stood splay-footed beneath the table.

"In that case, I take back about the begging," Robert said. "I don't really remember the circumstances, but I do remember that you were a ragged and very filthy little brat, and now here you are at ease in the Library, reading one of the books that is prescribed reading for my first term at Oxford next year! It's fantastic. Where did you learn to read?"

"At a Dame's School," Thirza said. "And then the Dominie instructed me."

"The who?"

"The Dominie. Mr. J. C. Christie, Esquire, Master of Arts."

"Oh yes, I've heard of the fellow. He's quite mad, isn't he?"

"Of course he's not," Thirza said. "He's no madder than you or me." And, realising that she had spoken as to an equal, she added, "sir." Any moment now she was expecting Mr. Robert to start being clever and sarcastic, and she wished that he would hurry and get it over with, so that she could collect her boots and cuffs and make her escape. Mr. Robert did not seem to be in a hurry, however, and, so far, he had not been at all clever and only very slightly sarcastic. He was watching her intently with that frank inquisitive stare which she had often seen on his mother's face. She emptied her eyes of expression, and fixed them blankly on a spot some inches wide of his right shoulder.

"Tell me," he said. "I suppose you often come here to read. But why, out of all the books in the Library, do you have to choose a thing like *Memoirs of the Reign of George II*? Why, Gare? That interests me. Why?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'll have to go, Mr. Robert. Miss Susan——"

"You must know," he said. "You would never select such a book for pleasure. Why that particular book, Gare?"

"Well," she said, trapped, "it was next on the shelf."

"Next to what?"

"Next to the last one I read."

He thought about that. He surveyed the nearest bookshelf, noted the gap which indicated the home of *Memoirs of George II,* and then turned his searching gaze back to Thirza. "And what will you read after you have finished the *Memoirs*?"

"The next one on the shelf," Thirza said patiently.

"And after that?"

"The next one." She thought the conversation was getting very silly, and she said, "Really, Mr. Robert, I must go now, if you please. . . ."

"I do not please," he said. "At least, not until I understand this. Do you mean to tell me that you are methodically reading along a shelf, book by book?"

"Yes, sir."

"And that you have already read, how many"—he craned his

neck to estimate the number of books from the end of the shelf to the gap—"seven or eight of these fearful tomes?"

"Five," she said. "This is the sixth."

"In God's name," he said, "why?"

There, it was what she had been waiting for; he was beginning to swear at her now! "Because I wanted to learn what was inside them, sir."

"And when you had come to the end of the shelf, I suppose you intended to start on the next shelf? And the next, and so on?"

"Yes, sir, until I had read them all."

He was eyeing her so strangely that she did not know what to expect next. A flutter of fear started in her stomach and rippled along her arms and legs. She cast a swift calculating glance at the door.

"Fantastic!" he said slowly. "My sister's maid! My God, it's incredible. How old are you, Gare?"

"I'm fifteen," she said. "I really must go, sir. I know I shouldn't have been here, and I'm very sorry and I won't come back again." She edged round him, moving in the arc of a circle until she had an unrestricted view of her cuffs. She leaned forward and snatched them up. "I'm very sorry. Please to excuse me, sir." And she turned and fled.

"Gare!" he called. "Wait. *Wait!*"

She was almost at the door, but she had to stop. She forced herself to look round. He was holding up her boots by the laces between thumb and forefinger, and on his face there was, incredibly, a sweet and gentle smile.

"I presume these are yours."

She retraced her steps reluctantly, and would have snatched the boots if he had not retained his hold on them.

"Gare," he said. "Listen to me. You can use the Library any time you like. Do you hear? Any time. But don't try to read all the books, or you'll soon get very bored. Select only the best. You'll find a comprehensive indexed list in the left-hand drawer of the table. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you are to continue to use the Library. That's an order." He released his hold on the bootlaces. "You may go now."

"Thank you, sir," she panted, and, tucking the boots under her arm, raced through the door like a footballer. As she reached the main hall she cast a backward glance down the corridor, and saw to her horror that Mr. Sinclair was watching her from the billiard-room doorway. She immediately stopped running and began to walk in as lady-like a way as is possible in stocking-soles. She heard Mr. Sinclair's feet padding across the hall behind her, but she did not look round again, and he did not call her.

He did not ever mention the incident, but from that time on she noted that he kept an eye on her, and that it was a cool and knowing eye.

(8)

After a decent interval Thirza continued to use the Library, and it frequently happened that when she was there Robert would drop in and exchange a few words with her on the subject of books. She could not understand why everyone disliked Mr. Robert. He couldn't have been nicer. He showed her the illustrated *Gulliver's Travels*, and introduced her to the works of Mr. Thackeray and Mr. Dickens. He even told her that if she wished she could take away one book at a time to her room, and she did this with great pleasure, concealing the book in her skirts before leaving the Library.

She knew, without ever bothering to reason out why, that no one would approve of these meetings with Master Robert, and, though she herself attached no importance to them, she was careful not to speak of them, even to Manson.

It never occurred to her that she was in any way being compromised, and—give him his due—it probably did not occur to Robert either. He was interested in the phenomenon, not the woman. He was concerned only with Gare's mind, and in all the times that they were alone together in the Library his conduct, despite his mother's later suspicions, was unexceptionable. Nay, exemplary.

CHAPTER II

(1)

IN AUGUST OF 1858 THE north of Scotland was devastated by a religious revival which swept like a tidal wave over the fishing towns of the Moray Frith and left in its wake a great sense of piety and moral exaltation, a form of insanity known as mania, and a sharp rise in the birth-rate. In fanatical all-night rallies thousands of solid citizens of both sexes and all ages were converted and saved, hundreds were struck down dramatically in swoons, and there was hardly a family on the coast from Colliston to Clyth in which there was not at least one case of mental or physical prostration.

Kaysie did not escape unscathed.

On Thursday, August 17, a covered wagon with crimson lettering on its white tarpaulin hood, drawn by a pair of Shetland ponies and driven by an unsmiling gentleman in a dark frock-coat, entered Kaysie by the Banff Road, and, accompanied by a swirl of capering children and yapping dogs, proceeded to exhibit its slogans throughout the town. They read, in letters almost a foot high: EZEKIEL FLEMING, MAN OF GOD. YE GENERATIONS OF VIPERS, HOW CAN YE ESCAPE THE DAMNATION OF HELL? FRIENDS, COME TO JESUS. Supplementing these exhortations, Mr. Ezekiel Fleming, the driver, would raise his hat and announce from time to time in flat, conversational tones: "Nightly at 8 p.m. In the school."

The caravan paraded everywhere. It criss-crossed the main streets, explored the lanes, entered all openings big enough to take the ponies' heads. If you had taken a pencil and charted the course of that caravan you would have made a pretty mess of your map: you would have obliterated all the roads with your scribbles and covered almost every backyard in the town.

By late afternoon the news that Mr. Ezekiel Fleming was in town had reached Carmichael House, and the atmosphere became charged with tension as the servants gathered in groups to recall the glories

of past revival meetings and to speculate on their chances of getting the night off to attend this one. Most of the excitement passed over Thirza's head. She was too young to remember the last revival, and, taking her cue from Manson, she affected to disapprove of the whole affair.

But she was much more interested than she pretended, and the following day, when the household was all a-twitter with reports of the first revival meeting, she searched out certain of the maids who had been there, and asked to be told all about it. She listened with rapt attention to their vivid, incoherent accounts, and she could not but see, as she studied their flushed faces and bright contented eyes, that these girls had undergone a great, a soul-stirring, experience.

When, at lunch-time, she brought up the subject of the revival and its effect on the maids, Manson, to her great surprise, snapped at her, "Let's dinna ha'e nae mair aboot it. I've had enough brimstane and fire, an' mair than enough revival this mornin' to last me a lifetime."

And to her even greater surprise Mr. Spence intervened. "Poor scoffer," Mr. Spence said, raising a stern face from his plate. "May the dear Lord fasten an arrow of conviction into thy heart."

There could not have been more consternation in the room if the Laughing Cavalier above the sideboard had stepped out of his gilt frame and laughed.

"Well, Mr. Spence," Manson said, bridling, "I didna expect it of *you*. A poor crater like Findlay, I can understand her gettin' dementit, but I maun say I never expected the like from a gentleman o' your standin'."

"Mr. Spence has the right to his opinions," Mr. Sinclair said smoothly.

"And so," Manson snapped, "have I, and I'll thank ye, Mr. Sinclair, to allow me to express them. I've had as much revival as I can stand from Findlay this mornin'."

"Findlay!" M'selle repeated. "What is that about Findlay?"

"Yes," said Thirza, anxious to prevent a scene, "what's the matter with Findlay? I saw her this morning on the stairs, and she looked all right to me."

"Well, she's not all right," Manson said. "She's fair dementit."

"She's . . . ?" M'selle arched her brows.

"Dementit."

"Dementit. What does that mean?"

"Mad."

"So," M'selle said, interested. "And what is the reason for that, if you please?"

"Ask Mr. Spence," Manson said shortly.

Mr. Spence appeared to have no knowledge of the matter, however; and after an interval of silence, in which she ate herself into a better humour, Manson gave them an account of the affair.

Findlay was a parlourmaid. She was about thirty-five years old, but she could have been taken for fifty. She had small, smudged features in an indeterminate face, a topping of streaked, sandy-grey hair, and no more figure than a boy; and, all in all, she was so insignificant that the moment you took your eyes off her you forgot what she looked like. You could not have found a less heroic figure, and it was very hard for Thirza, listening avidly, to identify the Findlay she knew with the wild and reckless creature of the housekeeper's story.

It appeared that Findlay had been brought home from the Revival Meeting in a donkey cart and dumped in a heap at the servants' entrance. She had passively allowed Manson to undress her and help her into bed, and Manson had thought that a night's sleep would restore her to normal. But it hadn't. Findlay had wakened singing "Canaan" at the pitch of her voice, had dressed herself sketchily, and had come downstairs to the west wing to drive the buyers and sellers out of the temple. She had been restrained from overturning Mr. Carmichael's desk only by its weight, and had been removed by main force to the kitchen annex, where she had calmed down and eaten a good breakfast.

During the early part of the morning she was vague but docile, doing her work as usual, and content to express her new self only by pushing her face into other faces and saying with a fatuous smile, "I've been saved, dearie. Have you?" But towards ten o'clock she had taken a turn for the worse. She stood on the stairs with an open Bible in her hand and declaimed to the maids in the hall. She declared that she had had four illegitimate children and that she had suffocated them all at birth. She was irrepressible. She had talked incessantly from that time on, shouting evangelist slogans

and breaking into snatches of evangelist choruses. She had chased the other maids round the house, trapped Tweeny in the angle between two walls in the scullery, and so terrified that poor half-witted creature with her talk of pit and serpents and flaming cesspool that Tweeny was now as good as demented herself and was meantime in bed with hysterics. Finally, they had caught Findlay and locked her in her room, but she had dropped the fifteen feet from the window to the ground, and had marched back into the house—by the front door, if you please! Nobody could do anything with her. Mistress Carmichael herself had spoken to her, severely but not unkindly. It had been a waste of breath. Findlay had merely clasped her Bible to her breast and, shaking her head, said serenely, "Poor sinner, I pity you."

Mistress Carmichael had naturally been shocked that a parlour-maid should talk to her in such a way, and she had sent MacGregor for the doctor.

But Dr. Grant had refused to come. MacGregor was sure that Dr. Grant could not have understood who he was, and he had gone to some trouble to explain that he was MacGregor, coachman to the Carmichaels of Carmichael House, and that he had been sent as a personal messenger by Mistress Carmichael herself.

"I don't care if you're the personal messenger of the Archangel Gabriel," Dr. Grant said. "If this woman's a revival case I won't attend her. Let her stew in her juice."

"What shall I tell Mistress Carmichael, sir?"

"Tell her I'm a busy man," the doctor said. "Tell her to get her ain fine doctor from Aberdeen."

No one else would have dared to send such a message to a Carmichael of Carmichael House, but Dr. Grant was a law unto himself.

At their wits' end to know what to do with Findlay, they had finally asked Mr. Carmichael, and Mr. Carmichael had given the answer. They were to lock Findlay in one of the boxrooms without a window, keep her there for forty-eight hours, and feed her only on bread and water. It was Mr. Carmichael's opinion that that would bring her to her senses, and if it did not, nothing would.

"And that's how I've spent my morning," Manson finished up grimly. "Chasin' that daftie. And I repeat"—she shot a hard glance

at the hitherto insignificant Mr. Spence—"that I personally have, despite what some may choose to think, had mair than enough revival to last me for the rest o' my time. It'll be weeks—weeks before I get a decent day's work out o' the maids after this."

Mr. Spence had shot his bolt. He did not take up the challenge.

"Most regrettable," Mr. Sinclair said in his bland, high voice. "Most regrettable. Females should not be admitted to revival meetings. They lack emotional stability. It is a thing I have frequently commented on. They flock in thousands to hear these preachers, and come away seeing visions and bleating like sheep about them. Did you hear the maids singing as they came up the drive last night?"

"I did that," Manson said. "And I also heard a good few rams bleatin' among them. You needna be so superior, Mr. Sinclair. I hear there were as many men at the meeting last night as there were women."

(2)

It was Saturday evening. The last of the revival meetings was to be held to-night, and Thirza was to be allowed to go to it. Meantime, it was just after six o'clock, and Thirza was in attendance upon Miss Susan. They were alone in the dressing-room. Susan, naked from the waist up, was bent over a wash-stand, her hair in a towel, while Thirza gripped the twisted end of the towel in one hand, and, with the other, sponged her mistress's neck and back.

"Ears now," she said. She snatched another towel from the neighbouring rack, draped it over Susan's shoulders, deftly twisted the first towel to force Susan to turn her head, and slapped a sud-clotted hand down on the now accessible pink ear. She was greatly excited, and her thoughts were on a plane where there was no such thing as a toilet; nevertheless, she performed her task with all her usual thoroughness. Susan's ears had to be clean, because later, when Susan was dressed, M'selle and Mistress Carmichael would inspect her, marching round her like guards officers inspecting a barracks, lifting everything that could be lifted, even Susan's ringlets, in the hope of finding some imperfection underneath. It was always like this when the Carmichaels had company for dinner, and to-night—it *would* just be to-night when Thirza was in a fever

to be off—they were having Very Important Company. Aristocracy. Lord Arthur Sanderson, to be precise. Only a political peer, still—a peer. It was, therefore, in gaming parlance, at least ten to one that Mistress Carmichael would insist on seeing not only one but both ears, and that M'selle would get down on her knees and burrow inquisitively all the way through to Susan's drawers. . . .

"I wish I was coming too," Susan said, co-operating languidly as Thirza thrust a chemise over her head. "I would much rather be coming with you than going to a stuffy dinner-party. Thirza dear, you're awfully rough with me to-night."

"I know," Thirza said. "I'm sorry. I'm in a hurry." She tied a pink ribbon into a bow at Susan's waist. "Is that all right? Too tight?"

"Yes," Susan said. "It pinches a little. But never mind it. Thirza, I asked Mamma if I could go to the revival, and do you know what she said?"

"Keep your waist in. No," Thirza said dutifully. "What did your Mamma say?"

"She said, of course I couldn't go, and not to be ridiculous, and Father said revivals just aren't for people like us. Revivals are all very well for the poor, Father said. They give the people something to think of besides their bodies, and probably do more good than harm, deuced inconvenient though they may be. I wonder why revivals should be good for the poor, Thirza, and not for me?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Thirza said. "Work your toes. That's that. Now the other leg. Manson says I'm not to move an inch from the MacGregors, and when the MacGregors leave I have to leave with them, but Cook says the MacGregors always stay right to the end."

"Is MacGregor going too, then?"

"Not MacGregor. I mean, Mrs. MacGregor and her sister. They've been every night, and Mrs. MacGregor has had manifestations—she saw the cross bathed in ethereal light when she woke this morning—but she hasn't been struck down yet. Hold up your foot till I get your garter on. Now, which petticoat do you want on first?"

"The pink one. Oh, Thirza, I wish I was going with you! You *are* lucky. You must note everything that happens and every single

word that anybody says, especially Mr. Fleming, and you must tell me all about it when you come back. Ready for my hair now?"

"Yes," Thirza said, busy gathering the necessary articles.

"You *will* tell me all about it when you come home, won't you? Thirza, I wonder what it feels like to be struck down. Do you think there will be lots of strikings down to-night?"

"Oh yes," Thirza said. "I expect so."

"What do you think it feels like?"

"Pretty godly," Thirza said. "Must be, I think."

"I think it must be terrible. I would hate to be struck down, wouldn't you, Thirza? Thirza, what if you are struck down? Wouldn't it be just awful?"

"If I'm struck down," Thirza said stolidly, "I'm struck down. I'm sure I'm not going to worry about it." Her mouth full of pins, she began to ply a brush on Susan's hair. "Mrs. MacGregor says," she said through the pins, "that it's a glorious feeling. Being struck down, I mean. She hasn't had it herself, mind, but she's seen plenty that have. Of course," Thirza continued, lifting a lock of Susan's hair and jabbing it into place with a tortoiseshell comb, "there are some that froth at the mouth when they're struck down, and there are some that go queer like Findlay, and I wouldn't like that at all. . . ."

The hair was dressed. Thirza slipped a muslin hood over Susan's head and knotted it at the neck, and they were now ready for the dress—a crinoline in foaming white chiffon, into which Susan was gradually eased to the accompaniment of a cross-fire of commands and a great flurry of activity. It was a delicate and important operation, like getting a battleship into dry dock. There, at last it was done. . . .

"Mind you, I don't expect to be struck down," Thirza said. She was far more worried about this than she was willing to admit. "I don't think I'm the sort that gets struck down. Hold up your arm for a minute, please. Before you wear this one again, I'll shift the top hook, because you seem to be getting too fat for it."

"I don't think you will be struck down," Susan said. "You're much too sensible. Thirza, do you really think that I'm getting fat? In a womanly way, I mean?"

Thirza grunted; sighed as Susan swung free of her to examine

herself in the full-length mirror, and stood flat on her heels, exasperated but with no expression in her face, as she watched Susan pirouette, lifting her bosom, studying herself. "I'm still not as big as you, and you're only fifteen. How big are you, exactly, Thirza?"

"Thirty-one."

"And I'm only twenty-nine. At least, that's what I was, wasn't I, the day before yesterday? Let's measure me again. Where's the tape?" And then she saw Thirza's face in the mirror, and the eagerness immediately crumbled out of her own face and was replaced by a look of intense compassion. "Never mind," she said, "I forgot. Of course, you're in a hurry and want to get dressed yourself. Just come and finish fastening me and tell me what you're going to wear."

"Well," Thirza said. "My coat—and my hat, I suppose."

"That flowery hat?"

"Yes."

They were silent, thinking of the hat. It had been a gift from Mary Belle, and it was a monstrosity. It was a large pink hat, decked with garlands of crudely coloured artificial flowers which mounted in tiers to the centre of the crown and culminated there in an upstanding riot of scarlet dahlias. It was the most expensive article of apparel that Mary Belle had ever bought, and she had bought it grandly for Thirza, in order that Thirza, who had no hat, might be able to Go Anywhere in it, as the salesman had said, secure in the knowledge that she was wearing the Last Word in fashionable headgear. Thirza duly went everywhere in it. She was well aware that a lady of fashion would as soon have been seen in a flower-pot, but Mary Belle had bought it for her, and paid a lot of money for it, and here it was, for better or for worse, her hat, and what could she do but wear it?

"I'll tell you what, I'll lend you one of my hats," Susan said.

"Thank you," Thirza said, tempted. "But I couldn't take one of your hats, Miss Susan."

"Whyever not, Thirza?"

"Well," Thirza said. "I don't think it would be proper for me to borrow anything of yours."

"Very well," Susan said. "I'll *give* you a hat. Goodness knows, I

have plenty. You can have whichever one you like best. Any one you like, except my new pale-blue poke bonnet."

Thirza shook her head. "You'd have to ask your Mamma."

"But Mamma would be sure to say you could have it."

"No," Thirza said. "I wouldn't like you to ask her."

"Mamma wouldn't mind at all, Thirza. Why, Mamma would be just delighted to give you one of my hats."

"No," Thirza said. "I mean, I know she would, but I don't want one of your hats, really." She brought out her best Dominie English. "I would prefer not to take one of your hats, thank you very much, Miss Susan."

Susan gave Thirza a searching glance. She had come up against this wall in Thirza before, and she knew precisely what it was. Pride. She and Mamma had discussed it, and they had come to the conclusion that Thirza was a very proud young girl. They had talked it out thoroughly in one of their frequent *tête-à-têtes* in Mamma's boudoir, and they had agreed that Thirza had far too much pride for her station in life and that it was regrettable, but that there was nothing they could do about it.

And therefore Susan did not dream of telling Thirza frankly that her hat was so gross and vulgar that it was not fit even for a maid to wear. Instead she thought very hard and said finally, "Nevertheless, Thirza, I do not think that hat of yours is a very suitable hat for the revival. It is so big that the people behind you won't be able to see."

"That's true," Thirza admitted. "Oh, well, I suppose I could go in a shawl. Like the fisher-women. Though, now that I think of it, I don't know if it would be proper for me to go in a shawl. Not now that I'm a lady's-maid."

It was then, as they stared at each other doubtfully, that Susan had the idea. She was visualising Thirza in a shawl, which would, of course, be a most improper garment for Thirza to wear, when it suddenly occurred to her that here in this room, in the bottom drawer of the Sheraton chest of drawers, she had the very thing for the occasion.

With a delighted cry she rushed to the chest of drawers, rummaged briefly, and returned with a piece of pale-blue silk a yard square, embroidered with a scene depicting the coronation of the

Virgin, the outlines worked in gold and silver threads and the figures filled in with glittering appliqué work—tinsel and treated beetles' wings and tiny fragments of reflecting glass.

"See," Susan said, holding it up triumphantly, "it's biblical! It's just right for the revival." She draped it over Thirza's head. "And look how it suits you!"

Thirza looked. She adjusted the square and knotted it at her throat. It certainly suited her, and it would go admirably with her dark-blue coat. "But it's your Mamma's, isn't it?"

"It's mine," Susan said, telling what appeared then to be a very white and insignificant lie. "And you're welcome to it. Just look at you! Why, Thirza, one would think you to be quite a young lady, and much older than fifteen. Truly, I would not be at all surprised if you were having admirers next!"

Thirza turned before the mirror, biting her lip, considering. She was extremely pleased with her reflection, yet she was troubled. She knew it was not proper to borrow from Miss Susan. . . .

"It is a very fashionable sort of headgear just now," Susan said. "All the really elegant ladies are wearing them, and if you like I shall show you pictures to prove it in Mamma's Paris fashion paper. Do say you'll take it, Thirza."

"Well, just for the night then," Thirza said. She turned again to the mirror, and, as she did so, Susan gave a little warning scream and clapped her finger-tips to her mouth. "Ooherethey-come!" she whispered.

The door was already opening.

With commendable alacrity Thirza snatched the draping from her head, thrust it up her skirts, and gripped it firmly between her knees; and when the inspection committee entered the room, it was pleased to note that Gare, for once, was standing rigidly to attention, just as a good lady's-maid should.

CHAPTER III

(1)

ALTHOUGH THIRZA, MRS MACGREGOR, AND Mrs. MacGregor's sister, Miss Cowie, reached the school some twenty minutes before the revival was due to begin, the schoolroom—extended for the occasion by the removal of the three-ply partition between Classroom I and Classroom II—was already uncomfortably full, and crowds were still moving in streams over the Barnyards, down Corn Hill and Session Street and Correction Wynd, all converging on the school.

Inside, there was indescribable confusion. As you came through the door the room discharged its load of emotional tension and flung at you, less agreeably, the stale, trapped odour of human breath and sweat. You were borne forward, panting for breath, in a rush of perspiring, slack-faced, and brilliant-eyed people, and soon you were perspiring, slack-faced, and brilliant-eyed yourself. You found yourself in the grip of a violent excitement, singing wildly, lifting your happy, ravaged face and sending your voice rocketing to the rafters. People pressed on you. They stood swaying, tight-packed, on the long benches, and they stood, even tighter packed, scuffling good-humouredly, on the floor space between the benches.

Still they came, oozing inexorably through the narrow door, and, as the pressure of body on body became unbearable, tempers began to rise and there were angry shouts to close the door.

It was at this stage that Ezekiel Fleming clambered up on to the schoolmaster's desk and stood erect there, a squat, impressive figure in a dark coat and muffler.

A trio of large candles stood in a wall bracket above his head and threw the shadow of his heavy brows down over the upper part of his face so that Thirza could not see his eyes. But she saw plainly that he was dark, and when he turned to point his voice right and left, she saw that he was clean-shaved to the tops of his ears, and that his cheeks were blue-black all along the razor's tracks. She

noted that his mouth was big and fleshy, and that his lower lip jutted like the lip of a spout, and there her observations ended. She found Mr. Fleming's appearance very disappointing. He had none of the special distinction that she had expected. Indeed, he was quite a commonplace-looking man, and if she had met him in the street she would have passed without noticing him.

She admitted that his voice was firm and pleasing, but she could not help thinking that, for all that, it was not a religious voice. It had no rasp and blast like Whisky Johnny's, and none of the soothing unction of the Reverend H. H. McEwan's. It was quite an ordinary voice, and it was saying a very ordinary thing. It was saying, as far as she could make out: "Brethren . . . multitude . . . no room . . . arranged with the Parish Church authorities. . . . Church at our disposal. . . . St. Margaret's. . . ."

There was a spontaneous outburst of cheering—St. Mairgret's—there would be room for everybody at St. Mairget's—and then, as Mr. Fleming got down from the desk, there was an impatient movement towards the door. Unfortunately, the people outside had not heard the announcement, and consequently were still as determined to get into the schoolroom as those inside now were to get out. It was some minutes before understanding was reached between the opposing factions, and during these minutes there were violent and regrettable incidents in the region of the door. When the outsiders did finally get it into their heated heads that the meeting was now to be held in St. Margaret's, their resistance broke suddenly, and they took to their heels and bolted for the church, intent on getting the front pews. This unexpected action had an effect on the schoolroom like the drawing of a cork from a badly treated champagne bottle. People flowed, spilled, cascaded through the newly opened bottle-neck into the street. Everyone had seen the advantage of coming early, and those who had come earliest were justifiably embittered at the thought that they would now arrive last at the church. There was a stampede for the door, and in this stampede Thirza, among others, was first crushed against the wall, and then jostled unceremoniously to the floor.

It was her gaudy head-dress which attracted Mr. Fleming's attention. He had been watching it out of the corner of his eye without really being aware of it, and when it disappeared from his field of

vision a query clicked into his consciousness, and, puzzled, he looked around for the bright-coloured object and caught a glimpse of it as it slithered out of sight. He immediately thrust himself into the mêlée. He was a powerful man, a master slater as well as an evangelist, and it was as a master slater that he forced a path across the room to Thirza. He cleared sufficient space to be able to bend down and grab her under the arms, and lifted her to a standing position against his chest.

"You all right?" he demanded.

"Yes," Thirza said. She put up her hand and touched her head. The silk square was still there. "Thank goodness," she said, and, greatly relieved, stared with curiosity across the two inches which separated Mr. Fleming's face from her own. It is very hard to see anything as close as Mr. Fleming's face then was, and while it was hard for Thirza to see Mr. Fleming, it was, of course, also hard for Mr. Fleming to see Thirza, and as a result of this unfortunate proximity, combined perhaps with the illusion cast by a guttering candle above their heads, it must here be stated that Mr. Fleming altogether misinterpreted Thirza's look.

He considered it a cool and speculative look.

Mr. Fleming did not exactly put into words in his mind the thought that the look on this girl's face was a cool and speculative look, for Mr. Fleming's mind did not run along the lines of these words, but through a complex, wordless process of thought he came to the very wrong conclusion, which can only be expressed crudely in words, that this was a cool and speculative look from a cool and speculative female. And his mouth tightened into the line of a normal mouth, and he cried out mentally, "Dear God, why must I always have this effect upon Jezebels?"

This double stare, with all its ramifications of thought, occupied only enough time for Thirza to blink once in an attempt to bring Mr. Fleming's face into focus, and then Mr. Fleming, with what she could not but think was an unbecoming roughness, pushed her aside, and, using his mason's shoulder, wedged himself back into the thick of the crowd.

Mrs. MacGregor and Miss Cowie, separated from Thirza in the crush and borne out on a human wave which swept them along with only the merest ineffectual paddling of their feet, were waiting,

arms firmly linked, outside the door. They clutched Thirza at once and thrust her possessively between their hips.

"He spoke to you!" Miss Cowie said. "He touched you!" Miss Cowie had a wild look. Her hat was on the back of her head, and her fringe dangled in sweated tassels over her brow. She was a tall, rangy woman, with a long neck and a long, thin nose, and now, as they hurried along in the awkward way that three women must who are linked tightly together, she plucked at her crop-like throat and thrust her face at Thirza like a pecking bird. "He actually touched you!" she shrilled. "Didn't he? Didn't he, then?"

"Of course he did, Polly," Mrs. MacGregor said sharply. Mrs. MacGregor was small and trim and normal, and you felt she always would be. "You saw him wi' your ain twa e'en, didn't ye?"

"Fit did he say? Oh, I wish he'd spoken to me. Fit did he say, Thirza? Tell us fit he said."

"He said, 'Are you all right?' And I said 'Yes.' "

"And fit else?"

"Nothing else."

Miss Cowie was disappointed.

"Still," she said, after a pause, "still, it must a been a great experience. Glory be. I wish he'd spoken to me. Tell me, Thirza, did ye feel a sort of a kind o' tremor, I suppose?"

"No," Thirza said.

"Naething oot o' the way?"

"No," Thirza said.

"Did ye nae feel what an honour it was, an' you at your very first revival, an' a'?"

"No," Thirza said honestly. "I felt nothing at all."

"Thirza!" Miss Cowie said fiercely. "Ye're nae a scoffer, are ye?" And she made as if to withdraw her hand from Thirza's arm.

"Oh no!" Thirza said. "Oh no, I'm nae a scoffer, Miss Cowie." And, though she did not like Miss Cowie's talon-like grip of her arm, she was relieved to feel it tighten again.

"Well, I must say you are taking it very calm," Miss Cowie commented. "I only wish it had been me he'd spoken to wi' that fine, noble voice of his. I'd a felt worthy, indeed I would. And he actually laid his hand on you. Eh noo, I wish it had been me; if only it had been me he laid his holy hand upon!"

"Be quiet, Polly," Mrs. MacGregor commanded. "Ye're ditherin'."

In silence, and all somewhat disgruntled, they entered the parish church.

(2)

When Thirza, Mrs. MacGregor, and Miss Cowie arrived at the church the congregation was singing lustily, the beadle was in the act of lighting the last of the candles, and Mr. Fleming and the Reverend H. H. McEwan were standing together in the pulpit.

Miss Cowie caused a slight commotion by discovering space for three in the fifth row, and by arguing fiercely with the usher who wished to seat them unobtrusively somewhere in the back, but eventually order was restored, and as Thirza sat down between the two bristling women (in the fifth row), she was aware that Ezekiel Fleming's dark eyes rested on her for a moment, and that their expression was one of brooding disapproval.

While the church was filling, Thirza looked round curiously. A staunch Free Kirker, she had never been in the Auld Kirk before, and she could not help wondering what Whisky Johnny would think if he could see her now. She consoled herself with the thought that she was not the only Free Kirker present. Nearly the whole of the Fishertown was here. She saw people she had not seen for years, including old housebound folks whom she had never known to go out. She saw Mistress Cormack (Bo) and Aul' Meg Airlie and Sophia Gault; and over in the second row of the west wing she saw her Aunt Jamaima, who had not spoken to her since her mother's death. She saw kent faces everywhere, and, though she had known their owners since childhood, she felt now that she did not know them as well as she knew Susan Carmichael and Manson and Mr. Sinclair, or even Miss Cowie and Mrs. MacGregor. She felt separated by a wide gulf of experience from all these humble folk. She straightened her shoulders and smoothed the silk square on her head. She was very aware of being a lady's-maid—lady's-maid, moreover, to one of the Carmichaels of Carmichael House.

There was meantime no one in charge of the singing, and, con-

sequently, there was some confusion as one section started up, "Come, oh come, thou vilest sinner," and another section, determined not to be bested, roared, "I can, I do, I will believe." The Reverend H. H. McEwan was not accustomed to scenes in his church, and was plainly pained as he advanced to the front of the pulpit and held up his thin white palms for silence.

Mr. McEwan's speech was brief and to the point. He first welcomed the congregation, and then, looking keenly into it, requested that the scenes of enthusiasm should not transcend the bounds of good taste, and that every person present should bear in mind the holy nature of the place in which he now sat. "It would not be appropriate, for instance," he said, "to stand on the pews. And it would be particularly inappropriate to stand on, or in any way mutilate, disfigure, or abuse those pews which have been cushioned by the generosity of those who rent them. I hope I make myself clear."

Mr. McEwan retired to the back of the pulpit, and the short compact figure of Mr. Fleming advanced to take his place at the rail. The revival proper now began.

At first it was not unlike an ordinary church service, and Thirza was sufficiently detached to be able to remember her promise to note everything for Miss Susan, but as Mr. Fleming knelt to make his first impassioned prayer, the hysteria all around mounted to a new high pitch and swept the last of her detachment away. She moaned as loudly as Miss Cowie for the maimed and the halt and the blind, and the drunkards and the blasphemers, and—oh, Lord, cast Thy Eternal Light down!—for the Magdalenes and the Manassehs. She recognised herself, just as everyone else did, in the lukewarm and the faint-hearted and the back-slider, and she groaned piteously at the consciousness of her original sin, and sobbed, "Nay! Oh, Lord, nay!" when Mr. Fleming pointed out that she now stood on the sloping rim of the pit.

She lost all sense of time. There was only the present—a present in which impression obliterated impression, while scenes blended into one another and emotion swirled through her like wind in a corridor of sand. . . .

The first striking down: a girl rising suddenly to her feet, sighing, falling sideways with a thin, whistle-like shriek, her legs stick-

ing out of her dress like knitting-pins as they laid her on the aisle. . . .

"Oh, Jacob, who do seek they face with their whole heart's desire. . . ."

Mr. Fleming's stiff shoulders and Mr. Fleming's pale face and Mr. Fleming's dark eyes. . . . "First ye must be cleansed, your sins must be blotted out. . . ."

And now singing with the strength of ten: "The God of Glory thundereth. . . ."

Mr. Fleming's voice, taut as metal, boring into you like a screw. . . . "The blood of the Lamb and the Holy Spirit, the blessed Spirit, the mighty Spirit, and the right road and the wrong road, and the edge of the gaping pit, and the blood of the Lamb, and the foot of the ladder, and the trembler and the scoffer, and the glory is thine, O Lord, repent in ashes, and the wages of sin is death, and the blood of the Lamb, and the sure certain fire, and the children that mocked Elisha, and now is the time to be born again, and Hallelujah, though thy sins be as scarlet, now is the time, now, and come now, now, come to Jesus, come now, come now, now is the time, now. . . ."

Singing again, oh, the singing. . . .

"See the Salvation, Salvation is near. . . ."

Miss Cowie's blackened teeth in her open mouth and Mrs. MacGregor holding you in her dear arms and the sweat dropping off her dear, hairy arms on to your hand, and everyone swaying and stamping and singing and screaming and beating the pews, and Mrs. MacGregor surreptitiously loosening her stays, and Miss Cowie a-slobber with joy and asking you to beat her on the bosom, and you beating her nobbly chest with your clenched fists and her loving you and you loving her and everybody loving everybody except the scoffers, and soon to be saved. . . .

And Mr. Fleming's stiff shoulders and Mr. Fleming's pale face and Mr. Fleming's dark eyes, and Mr. Fleming calm, so calm, oh, so calm, calm, dear Mr. Fleming. . . .

"Now, my brethren, now is the time, come to Jesus, now is the time. Now, now, *now*. . . ."

And a fisherman standing up, a man she knew, whose name she used to know but had forgotten, a wise old man as hard as a

tarry rope, a proud man, with a voice like a trumpet, he spoke out of a shining face, such glories he had seen, oh, such lightful glories, Allelujah, praise the Lord, he was saved. . . .

And then another man, a stranger, a man in a dress coat with a black cravat, a shopkeeper they said. This man had been a heavy sinner. He had been to the edge of the pit, but, praise God, he cried, he was on the narrow road now, he had a crown of glory, he wished they all had crowns of glory, he wished he had a thousand souls so that he could entrust them all to God, and yes, he said, Mr. Fleming was right, yes, there were indeed scoffers present. "Poor scoffers," he said, "may the Lord fasten a fiery arrow of conviction into their hearts. Lord," he said, "pour down Thy Holy Spirit on their heads. . . ."

And now they were springing up in clumps, like trampled grasses, men and women, children too, all saved folks, burning-eyed saved folks, telling you of the glories and the visions they had seen, and the bad things, the bad, bad things they had once done. But that was all over and done with. Now they were cleansed, praise the Lord, Allelujah, they were pure, saved folks, and they warned you and prayed for their loved ones to be made likewise good and pure, and told you of the splendid shining glory that was yours when you too were saved. . . .

And now Mr. Fleming, who had been standing at the back of the pulpit with his hand in the V of his coat, so stiff and calm, oh, so calm, stepped forward and took charge, and now you were singing, all singing, "I can, I do, I will believe" over and over and over and over.

And now they fell in their dozens, to left and right and all around you, dumpity dump and skitter foosh, some slopping soft as willows over the pews, some crashing clean and hard like well-sawn trees, and nobody now bothered about them, nobody touched them or even looked at them. And now more praying, and more confessing, and more singing; oh, the wild, awful, beautiful sound of that singing. . . .

And now Mr. Fleming was speaking. He was saying wonderful, wonderful things, but it did not matter what he was saying. It was the sound of his voice like a screw in your heart, and the look on his calm, pale face, and the still, stiff way that he stood, so calm,

oh, so calm, with his hand motionless in the V of his coat. He was a great man, Mr. Fleming, a great and good man, a powerful man. If he took his motionless hand out of his coat and pointed his finger at you, it would strike you down like the wrath of God. He was a great and good man, calm as the sea in deep places. He was a great and powerful man, though small-built, and oh, what a beautiful speaker, dear Mr. Fleming, bless Mr. Fleming. . . .

And now Mr. Fleming was retiring to the back of the pulpit, and Miss Cowie was on her feet again—was this the second or third time?—and there were others too, all desperate to speak, but they gave way to Miss Cowie, and Miss Cowie was saying terrible things about Miss Cowie, and the saliva was trickling unheeded from the corner of her mouth; and now other women, not unlike Miss Cowie, lean, leathery, unmarried women were straining forward like horses on a steep hill, to confess the same dreadful sins as Miss Cowie had confessed. . . .

And now Mr. McEwan, with his cool face on fire, looking himself like a younger, softer, much prettier Miss Cowie, here was Mr. McEwan of all people flinging himself at the front of the pulpit, thumping with his fists and shouting in a high, high voice, taut as tug-wire, that there was such a thing as being too frank and he'd have no more of it, no more of this scarlet talk. "You must damp your ardour," he cried, with a fire that lit flames anew all over the church. "Damp it! Damp it!"

And now Mr. Fleming stepped forward and said something to Mr. McEwan, and Mr. McEwan said audibly, "But there's no need to stop. Really, there's no need to stop." And Mr. Fleming half-turned and nodded towards the candles above the pulpit, and everyone looked at the candles then and saw that the candles were guttering.

And now Mr. Fleming was speaking again, and it was all over. Somebody started to sing, "Glory Hallelujah! Praise Hallelujah!" and soon everybody was singing it. A fluster of arranging broke out as people discussed who would carry who home, and how; some of the children ran around the church, shouting, "Seven, acht, nine, ten, eliven . . ." counting the bodies. There was a great lifting of devout hands, and a happy wailing and weeping, and now a general movement towards the doors. . . .

By the time Thirza and her escorts reached the doorway, Mr. Fleming had taken up his stance there, and, still, calm and self-contained, was bidding farewell to the congregation as it filed past, nodding and smiling to all, and singling out certain individuals for a special word.

He nodded to Thirza, and, when she did not halt, touched her authoritatively on the shoulder.

"I am seeing some of the younger people of the town to-morrow morning before I leave," he said in a low, confidential tone. "Particularly those who are sorely troubled and may still be doubting. At eleven o'clock in my caravan."

"I can't come at eleven," Thirza said. "I have to dress Miss Susan for church."

"And who is Miss Susan?"

"Miss Susan Carmichael. My mistress."

"Eleven-thirty then."

That was all. Someone else claimed Mr. Fleming's attention, and Thirza stumbled through a scrum of embracing men and women outside the door and rejoined Mrs. MacGregor and Miss Cowie. Both had been on their feet at the meeting, Mrs. MacGregor admitting to an occasional lack of charity in her dealings with her husband and her husband's relatives, and Miss Cowie confessing to a list of carnal sins as long as her leg. They were to spend a large part of the rest of their lives taxing each other with these confessions, but in the meantime they were in perfect harmony. They embraced each other and they embraced Thirza, and then they set off along the road, hugging her between them, and singing at the pitch of their voices:

"Mine eyes have seen the glory
of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage
where the grapes of wrath are stored:
He has loosed the fatal lighting
of his terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on."

Thirza was gloriously happy. She heard voices, saw visions. She

felt that she was on the verge of a great discovery. She had a sense of initiation. She was confident that she now understood many things which she had not understood before, and, although she did not know quite what these things were, she was satisfied that she had had a Revelation. She felt herself bathed in the Holy Spirit as in a warm and wondrous fluid, and in a sudden uncontrollable access of joy she cried aloud to the inattentive world to witness the miracle of it: she was saved.

When they reached the Brig they heard behind them a great and joyful commotion, and they stopped curiously and waited, leaning, tightly linked, against the parapet.

It was now after midnight and dark, and it was not until the straggling procession of saved souls was quite near that they saw that it was made up of fellow servants from Carmichael House, one of whom—Mr. Spence—was trundling a wheel-barrow.

As the procession reached them, there was an outburst of exclaiming and embracing, and Miss Cowie promptly asked Mr. Spence about the barrow. But Mr. Spence was in too exalted a state to hear, and walked right past her, singing hosannas. Miss Cowie grabbed the nearest person, who happened to be the cook, and repeated her question.

"Fa's in the barra?" she demanded.

"Fa would ye think?" Cook retorted in her matter-of-fact Aberdeen voice. "God is merciful, praise the Lord."

"It couldna be Findlay," Mrs. MacGregor said.

"It could and is," Cook said. "It jist is Findlay then."

"But it couldna be Findlay. Foo could Findlay of gotten oot when she was locket in the boxroom? It's nae Findlay, really, Cook?"

"It is Findlay," half a dozen voices said.

"Well mercy, Lord be praised. But we never saw Findlay. Did we, Polly? Did we, Thirza?"

"It's Findlay a' right," Cook said. "Dinna ask me foo she got there, but she got there sure enough, nae half-dressed neither, an' she wisna there meenits when she let oot a skirl like the crack o' doom, surely you heard her skirl, and doon she went like a rummel o' bricks."

"God is merciful but greatly to be feared," Miss Cowie said.

"Praise the Lord. Hallelujah. It's fine we've got a body wi' us."

"Heth ay," they said. "Praise God."

They were all pleased to be associated with this manifestation of the Divine Will. They looked with pride in the direction of the dark bundle in the borrow.

Arm in arm, they stoitered up the drive to Carmichael House, singing first "Canaan," and then "Allelujah, Come to Jesus," at the pitch of their voices. They held a brief conclave at the servants' entrance, and decided to march once round the house singing, "What's the news?"

They were just completing the circuit of the house when Mr. Sinclair, Philistine that he was, came to the servants' entrance and tried to intimidate them into silence. They were not to be bullied. They rebuked him with a dignity far in excess of his own, and sang two more choruses to emphasise that they were no longer subject to temporal authority. Then, with many expressions of piety and good-will, they bade each other good night and went, exhausted, to bed.

Thirza dreamed that night of Ezekiel Fleming. He was climbing a long, narrow ladder out of a pit. The pit seethed with serpents, but Mr. Fleming was unperturbed. He was stepping sedately up the ladder, as calm and methodical as a lamp-lighter. He had a golden crown on his head, and, behind each ear, two small golden wings, the size of a sparrow's.

CHAPTER IV

(1)

IT WAS HOT. THE NOONDAY sun beat on the L of the Bay, striking sparks, like chips of polished steel, off the surface of the sea. In the streets, the glare bounced up from the sharp angles of the doorsteps, and dust stirred underfoot at the joints of the paving-stones. In the residential district children, too young to go to Kirk, played decorously on the dappled sunlit patterns which lay rigid as wire-netting beneath the trees, and in the lower regions of the town the squalid horse-shoe arches of the closes were touched briefly with black and white splendour. Alongside at the harbour, a barque, stately as a swan among ducklings, raised her three masts proudly above the clutter of fishing-boats, and the sun took her masts and all the delicate, foliated tracery of her rigging and laid the lot in a perfect fore-shortened version across the drab, grey flags of the quay. A few black-headed gulls circled lazily, and out to sea, just visible in the haze, a solitary ship was revealed in a triangle of white mainsail. It was Sunday, August 20, and a perfect summer day of a kind that is seldom seen in the temperate north of Scotland.

Leaving the town behind, Thirza began to climb the road which mounted to the Ridge. She was bound for the Fir Wood, where Ezekiel Fleming, seeking to escape from the handshakers and the doubters and the dogmatists, had pitched his camp; and she ran, for she was already late.

In a glade surrounded by an outer screen of tagged and tufted fir saplings and laced with clumps of purple-spired foxgloves, Ezekiel Fleming's black ponies nibbled contentedly at the bark of a young birch tree, and Ezekiel Fleming's caravan, its wheels half-hidden, rose from a sea of feathered grasses with the awful aspect of an ark.

There was nobody in sight. Thirza slowed to a walk, cast a slanting glance at the sun, and came to a halt in the angle of a young fir's roots. She stood undecided for a moment, scraping a foot

across a truss of yellow weeds, and then, with a nod to the ponies, she stepped into the clearing and advanced towards the caravan.

The heavy heads of grasses struck against her legs, beneath her skirts. A thrush sang placidly. There was no sound from the caravan, but a thin blue drift of smoke rose from the funnelled chimney. Thirza thought, "Maybe I'm too late. I must be too late. All the others must have gone." She looked again at the ponies, paused and wriggled her shoulders to ease the discomfort of her sweaty back, and forced herself to mount the three brass-edged steps at the rear of the caravan. She put a hand on the canvas door-flap and called, "Mr. Fleming! Mr. Fleming, are you there?"

Listening, she heard the beginning of a movement, and, shy suddenly, jumped backwards to the ground.

The flap stirred, and Ezekiel Fleming's broad face appeared in the opening. He said, "Oh, it's you. Wait a minute," and disappeared.

Thirza waited. She had not been able to help noticing that Mr. Fleming's manner had been decidedly unfriendly and her excitement began to evaporate. She didn't blame him for being cross. After all, she was more than half an hour late. She waited patiently for several minutes, and, when at last Ezekiel Fleming flung the flap wide open and motioned her to enter, she said in a rush, "I'm sorry I'm late. I had to get Miss Susan off to church, you see, and when Miss Susan was down in the carriage Mistress Carmichael—that's Miss Susan's mother—sent word up—she was in the carriage too—that she wanted her new white fur tippet and matching muff, and M'selle—that's Mistress Carmichael's maid—couldn't find the muff, so of course I had to help her, and we had to pull everything out of the chest of drawers, and then afterwards we had to put everything back in again. M'selle is very particular, and she was in a bad temper, because she was wakened last night by the singing; she hasn't had the grace, and she never slept another wink, or so she says, and she kept me a long time, and I am very sorry, but that is why I am late."

"No matter," Mr. Fleming said vaguely. "No matter. Come in."

Thirza went in.

She saw the caravan's anatomy—the arched girders set up like ribs to support the tarpaulin hood; the squat brick stove, plumb centre, fitted into a cast-iron floor-plate; the driver's seat, curtained

off but shaped by the taut canvas curtain; and in the brief moment of her entry, while Ezekiel Fleming still held the door flap for her, she glimpsed the pattern of his living in the precise arrangement of effects—narrow, brown blanketed bed, table, jam-jar with roses, Bible, suspension lamp, altar cloth in blue linen, canvas stool, metal pail and basin, coarse huckaback towel, mottoes from the Scriptures. . . .

Ezekiel Fleming released the door flap, and it fell back into place, the light receding swiftly in a fugitive strip which flashed across her face and left her pupils dilating in its wake.

"Sit down," Mr. Fleming said.

She peered hard into the gloom, and saw that he had removed the stool from her path and held it behind him. She leaned forward, blinking, and then, feeling rather than seeing an imperious movement of his hand, she seated herself primly on the edge of the bed.

Mr. Fleming sat down on the stool. "Your name?" he demanded.

"Thirza Gare." She began to be aware of the atmosphere then. Heat seeped through the tarpaulin hood and streamed from the stove. Smoke, leaking from the flanges of the stove-pipe, prickled her eyes, and the hot dead air gathered in a lump in her chest. She wished passionately that Mr. Fleming would open the door flap. She began to pant audibly, and she put a hand to her throat and ran a finger under her neck-band.

"Hot?" Mr. Fleming enquired.

"Oh no," she said.

"In the East," Mr. Fleming said. "When I was in the East and the heat became intolerable, we closed the shutters, and thus kept cool in the same manner as did the ancient Israelites when they laced up their tents at Rephidim."

Silence fell and gathered uncomfortably. Thirza felt the heat boxing her in, pressing on her temples, stoving in her chest. She could not understand why she had said she was not hot or did not feel the heat when she was very hot and felt the heat so terribly that at any moment she might faint. She moved a cheek's length away from the stove, feeling the ruffle of her moist underclothing against her skin.

The smell of cooking drifted to her out of the fug, and she wondered briefly if she had interrupted Mr. Fleming at a meal, but before she could speak to ask him Mr. Fleming got to his feet and began to pace the floor. She was now accustomed to the dark, and

she could see him plainly as, hands clasped behind his back, he strode backwards and forwards on the far side of the stove, four steps this way and four steps that, taking each turn on his right heel with the clipped precision of a guardsman. Watching him, her eyes shuttled left and right, shuddered to a stop.

"Now," he said, and he spoke without any of the power and glory that had been his in the church. He spoke diffidently, and she had the odd feeling that he was uncertain of himself. "Yes. You have come to me that I may pluck thy feet from out of the net. Yes. Yes. No doubt you are doubting. . . .

"No," Thirza said.

"No doubt you are doubting," Mr. Fleming continued, broke off abruptly, now plainly uncertain, and took a firm hold of his coat lapels. "If you are not doubting, why have you come here?"

"You asked me to," Thirza said.

"Yes, yes, I feared it," Mr. Fleming said. "I knew it." And he flung away in a flat-footed pirouette and began to pace the caravan again, backwards and forwards, faster and faster, while Thirza sat gaping, her head swinging like a pendulum. She was aware that this was a very different man from the calm, oh, so calm Ezekiel Fleming who had conducted the Revival Meeting the previous night. She could not see his face for the tears that kept gathering in her prickled eyes, but she did not need the evidence of his face to know beyond all peradventure that here was a sorely troubled man. Now, still walking, he began audibly to pray. She saw his profile rise in the quick authoritative jerks of the practised praying man, and heard his voice as a fierce and rhythmic music which stirred responding chords of emotion in her. She forgot the heat and the smoke and her discomfort. Religious phrases sparked in her mind. Her mouth hung slack. She began to vibrate with excitement. When Ezekiel Fleming, still walking, still praying, struck his chest with his clenched fists, she moaned aloud in a rush of bitter-sweet emotion, and, her face transfigured, joined her soft voice to his in an accompanying mumble of prayer. Now he beat his temples and groaned so agonisingly that the sound jerked her from her hypnotic daze.

"Are you sick?" she panted.

"I am wrestling with the Devil," Mr. Fleming said. He came to rest before her, looking down at her with groping, tormented eyes.

"And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy. Ah, Lord, dear Lord, have mercy upon me, a sinner!"

"Ah, Lord," Thirza whispered. "Mercy!"

"Lord, I cry unto Thee: make haste unto me; give ear unto my voice, when I cry unto Thee, for verily my adversary, as a roaring lion, he walketh about, seeking me to devour me. Ah, Lord, let the trumpets sound! Overcome him, Lord, by the blood of the Lamb, the blood of the blessed Lamb, for my torment is as the torment of serpents, and the smoke of my torment ascendeth up for ever and ever. Woe is me, I have drunk of the wine of the wrath of God and I have tasted blood and am tormented with fire and brimstone. Oh, Lord, Lord!"

"Lord!" she echoed.

She did not know quite how it happened, but here was Ezekiel Fleming on his knees, his head in her lap, and here she was, clasping his poor tormented head protectively between her moist palms. And Ezekiel Fleming was crying aloud in a voice of anguish, "You have come to me that I may set your feet upon the path and lead you into salvation, and I am myself but a poor sinner, unworthy, for though I preach the gospel and have not handled the Word of God deceitfully, I have nothing to glory of, I am no saint; I have lusted after evil things and sinned grievously, and I am unworthy in the sight of God. Unworthy. Oh, Lord. Unworthy. . . ."

"No, no," she sobbed. And she held his head tighter, lacing her fingers into the thick black hair at his temples. She felt herself possessed. Darkness was beginning to sweep over her in great hot waves, and she felt that she was drowning in it. She heard Ezekiel Fleming's voice from a long way off and clung more fiercely than ever to his head.

"You are exalted," he was saying calmly. The pressure had gone from his voice. It had struck her in torrential jets; now it flowed soothing over her, and his hands moved with it, in bland caresses. "You are exalted. . . ."

"Yes," she whispered.

"No doubt you have had manifestations and revelations."

"Yes, oh yes!"

"You are exalted above measure."

"Yes, yes, yes."

"It is laid down in the Book. And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to buffet me. Thirza Gare, do you hear me?"

"I hear you," she said. She felt very queer. "I think I am going to faint."

"The thorn," Mr. Fleming seemed to say. "The Devil. You must wrestle. Wrestle." There was a violence in him now that stirred a delicate answer in her. His voice cracked like a lash in some distant void. She was in that void, in the circle of the lash. "Wrestle, wrestle!" She wanted to obey, to do the godly thing, to wrestle with the strength of ten, but she couldn't, she couldn't even lift a finger; and, anyway, Mr. Fleming was wrestling enough for them both. She felt herself lifted bodily, she was on her feet now, clinging to him, drooping, gloriously dying while he fought for her, dear Mr. Fleming, wrestling with her devil, plucking and pummelling and twisting the flesh that concealed it. She felt no pain, no uneasiness, no anxiety whatsoever. She knew that she could trust herself absolutely to Mr. Fleming. Safe from all fear and ill, she was floating upwards in a stream of glory. . . .

The interruption came in the nick of time. The door flap rasped open, light struck her eyelids, and a strange voice spilled into the caravan.

Mr. Fleming ceased to wrestle. He dropped his hands to his side, and Thirza, deprived of her prop, slithered to her knees. She sucked in great gulps of fresh air and gaped foolishly at the face in the doorway. She thought laboriously, "It is the face of a man." She watched the movement of his lips, saw rather than heard the spurt of words. She thought, "An angry man." She had an urge to scream.

Instead, she looked at Mr. Fleming. She shook her head and looked up at Mr. Fleming, and, despite the heat, she shivered and a stone of horror began to form in her stomach. She turned again to the stranger at the door. She saw now that he was a middle-aged man, with a lined, wind-stained face, and that he wore the black guernsey of a fisherman. He spoke with the sing-song lilt of "up the coast," and she now understood only too well what he was saying.

"There's nae mistake," he said. "No, nor nae likeness o' nae mistake. Nettie, is this the maun?" He stepped aside, and Thirza saw that he was not alone. Behind him stood a drooping, white-faced girl of about her own age. "Is this him, Nettie?"

"That's him," the girl said, and she sobbed and covered her white face with her hands.

Thirza stared at her. She knew very well what had happened to this girl Nettie, and she knew that the thing which had happened to Nettie would have happened to her also if it had not been for the grace of God and the timely intervention of Nettie's father.

She got to her feet and lurched forward, bent as if boring into a wind. She stumbled against the angry man at the door, thrust past the girl, and moved off in a stupid, weaving course across the glade. Once she fell, and when she fell she had not the sense to rise. She had only instinct. Instinct to keep moving, to get away. She crawled for some yards like an animal, whimpering at the hindrances of her skirt. And then she was on her feet, human again, but doubting it. She raised her eyes to the glaring sun and whimpered, "God, God, God!"

(2)

Manson was the only person whom Thirza could tell, and even to Manson she could not at first tell the full terrible story. She knelt by Manson's chair, her face buried in Manson's voluminous lap, crying wildly, while Manson stroked the dishevelled head, and, quite misled by the little she had heard and by the violence of Thirza's grief, drew the logical conclusion and herself cried a little —but quietly so that Thirza would not guess it—and willed a fierce malediction on the entire male sex.

"You winna tell," Thirza entreated.

"No, no, lassie, of course not. There noo."

"Naebody. Promise it. Promise, Manson!"

"I promise ye I winna tell a soul. Wheesht then, weel-a-wans lass, it's nae the end o' the world. It's happened to quines afore, ay, an' it'll gang on happening as lang as there's mortal men, bad cess to them. There, my dawtie. There. There now."

But Thirza was inconsolable. She wept in a frenzy of hysteria. Pictures swirled past her mind's eye against a looming background of Ezekiel Fleming's face. Horrible, grotesque pictures of the re-

vival and of the scene in Ezekiel Fleming's caravan, pictures in which men and women cavorted in Bacchanalian orgies and writhed together like damned souls in more than mortal agony. Gone were the glorious visions of the past two days, and in their place were these merging, terrible pictures, photographed precisely in her brain at the time of their happening and tilted now, in recollection, to the horror of a nightmare. And always in the background Ezekiel Fleming's face. Calm, scowling, smiling, smirking. Always Ezekiel Fleming's face. She thought of him as a fake and a liar and a fornicator, and she identified him with the Gospel he had preached, and she hated him, and hated it, and hated herself, hated everyone and everything.

She had lost more—far more—than Manson thought, for she had lost her faith. For the time being she had lost everything that gave meaning to life and made it worth the living. Her world stood on its head and shrieked. Lost, lost, all lost. She was a lost child. She wept despairingly.

It was at this juncture that Mistress Carmichael, making one of her infrequent descents on the housekeeper's room (probably to demand something as inconsequential as a ball of twine), opened the door and came to an abrupt halt in the doorway.

She stood for a moment with her hand on her throat, a petite, elegant and—for once—unself-conscious figure, absorbing actions and actors and then, gradually, the import of the scene. She said, "Who? . . . Thirza . . . what? . . ." And she paused and became wary as a stalking cat. "Manson," she said in a new voice. "Not? . . ."

And Manson nodded.

"Dinna tell, dinna tell!" Thirza sobbed. She raised a bloated, dribbling, hostile face. "Manson!" she screamed. "You promised!"

"It's a' richt, it's a' richt, noo, I winna tell."

"What won't you tell?" Mistress Carmichael demanded. She closed the door. Carefully. "What is it you won't tell? What's the meaning of this? Thirza? Manson! I insist on an explanation."

"Nae just now," Manson said. "Ma'am, if you please. Nae noo. The bairn's nae fit for a scene. She's had a' she can stommick. Ah noo, steady lass, steady Thirza."

"But this is incredible—impossible." Mistress Carmichael stared

at them in horror. "I mean . . . this is dreadful. Dreadful. Thirza, I demand—stop that noise at once. I positively demand that you tell me, that you at least hint to me, come now, who was it? Who was the man?" She took a step forward. "Thirza. . . ."

"No," Thirza said, wailing. "No, no, no!"

"Manson, I insist on being told. Manson!"

"I canna tell ye, ma'am."

"Why not? Why can't you?"

"I jist canna," Manson said.

Mistress Carmichael hid her face in her hands. Her first, her immediate suspicion had been: Robert. The moment she opened the door, the moment she had seen that it was Thirza Gare who knelt sprawling on Manson's knees, she had felt a chill stab of fear, and she had thought: "Robert." She was not unobservant, and she had noted with some anxiety that Robert had had his eye on Thirza Gare, and just yesterday Mr. Carmichael himself had brought up the subject. He had learned of it from Sinclair. "That new butler is a fool," she had said. "And this story of their meeting in the Library is nothing but a pack of lies. He's a fool and a sneak and a hateful man, Richard, and he has done nothing but cause trouble since he came." And she had worked away from the issue, and the matter had gradually got lost in a maze of bandied grievances. But she had believed the allegation even while she was indignantly denying it, and it had worried her, although not too much, for she had had the consoling thought that in another month's time Robert would be off to Oxford, and in the meantime she had meant to be very vigilant: she had even intended to speak to this suddenly unspeakable creature Thirza Gare. . . . And now it was too late. She knew it for certain now. What other reason could they have for hiding the man's name from her? The man was Robert. Of course it was Robert. She had known from the first that it was Robert. . . .

She wailed aloud, and the unexpected sound terrified Thirza into a new and greater awareness of her guilt. She gave a hysterical giggle that rose to a long-drawn cry on a shrill note, like a whistle, and ferreted her nose into the soft flesh above Manson's knees."

"I am going to be ill," Janet Carmichael said. "Very ill. Do you realise what this means? Mr. Carmichael will have to be told."

And she shuddered, thinking herself of what it would mean; thinking of actually telling him, thinking how yesterday she had pooh-poohed the very idea of her Robert and this—this slut; thinking of the weapon she must now deliver into her husband's vengeful hands. "The disgrace!" she said. "Terrible. Friends. Mr. Carmichael. Unspeakable. Oh, oh!" And she hid her face again in her hands. "Thirza Gare," she said presently, and she was thin-lipped now and nasty, leaning forward, hands on outflung knees, about to speak a portion of her mind. "Thirza Gare. . . ."

"No," Manson said. "It wisna her wight. Can't ye leave her alane, ma'am? This is nae time to say cruel and hurtful things. The bairn's in torment. And it wisna her wight, the puir wee lassie. She was ta'en advantage o'."

"How dare you!" This was too much, altogether too much—and from the faithful Manson too. "How dare you sit there and suggest that it wasn't her blame! Are you trying to tell me that it was my own s——" And she bit the word off in her mouth. That would have been very foolish. That would have been just the sort of thing that Richard was always criticising her for. And rightly too. She was a foolish woman. Tears spurted in the backs of her eyes. With a great effort she kept them there. It was not the time for tears. Afterwards, she would cry, cry her heart out. Now she must act with great care, she must do just what Richard would do, the right thing. She rose, stiff-backed and controlled. "It is always the woman's blame," she said. She was the mistress now, coldly and carefully using the mistress's weapons. "Thirza Gare, you will go to your room and remain there until a decision is reached. You must leave the house at once. Arrangements must be made. Meantime, you will go to your room. Manson, you will kindly see that she goes to her room and remains there. She is to see no one. No one at all. Do you hear me? And she is not to communicate with any of the servants."

Manson could not understand it. Her face declared that this punishment was preposterous, but, busy with Thirza, alarmed at the child's increasing hysteria, she could not find the words to express her indignation. She merely gave her mistress one quick look, a look which Janet Carmichael afterward described to her husband as extremely insolent, and turned her whole attention back to Thirza.

Mistress Carmichael hovered for a moment above them. "I am very disappointed in you, Manson," she said. "Very——" Her voice cracked. She turned and swept from the room.

(3)

Later that afternoon Susan stole up the back stairs to Thirza's room. She knew that something dreadful had happened, that Thirza had been concerned in this dreadful happening, had perhaps even brought it about. She knew this, because her mother had told her that Thirza Gare was locked in her room, and that she, Susan, was on no account ever to see or speak to Thirza Gare again; because she had been ordered significantly to take a walk, and because Robert had been sent by chaise to his uncle's at Cairnlea Castle—you would have thought there was a plague in the house; and because her father and mother were now closeted together in secret consultation in the study. She knew that something strange, momentous, and evil had happened, but she did not know what it was, and, temporarily, she did not care. She was exclusively concerned with a sin of her own, and with her own guilty conscience.

She tapped gently on Thirza's door.

"Thirza," she said, whispering. "Thirza, are you there?"

"Hullo," Thirza's voice said. "Is that you, Miss Susan?"

"Why have they locked you up? What have you done, Thirza? Can you hear me all right? I've got to whisper because I'm not supposed to be speaking to you."

"It's not what *I've* done," Thirza said. "It's what other people have done."

"What other people? Oh, Thirza, you've no idea what an afternoon I've had. I'm terribly worried."

"There's nothing for you to worry about, Miss Susan."

"Oh yes, there is," Susan said. "Listen, Thirza, something awful's happened. There's been a fearful fuss. You know that thing I gave you to wear on your head, with the pictures on it—well, Mamma decided she'd like to wear it for her walk after church, and M'selle couldn't find it, of course, and Mamma was very cross, and she said if it wasn't found by tea-time she intended to take the matter up, and you know what that means. Mamma is not herself to-day, she is cross about everything, and you simply have

to give me that thing back right away so that I can put it in the wardrobe where M'selle can find it. Thirza, can you hear me?"

"Yes," Thirza said. It seemed silly at a time like this for Miss Susan to worry about such a trifle. For her own part, she didn't care two pins about that silk square, but of course she would help Miss Susan if she could. She thought laboriously. . . .

"But," she said, "you said it was yours."

"I know I did," Susan said unhappily. "I never thought that Mamma would want it. She's had it for weeks and she's never even looked at it, and it suited you so well, I didn't think there was any harm. . . . Thirza, you do still have it, don't you?"

"Yes," Thirza said. "It's in my box."

"Where?"

"Here, in my box. Under the bed."

"Well, give it to me straightway."

"I can't," Thirza said. "The door's locked."

Silence.

"I could—I suppose I could throw it out of the window," Thirza suggested.

"Yes. Yes, Thirza, do that. Do it now. Is there anybody outside? Look out of the window and see if you see anybody first. Is there anybody there?"

"I can't see anybody."

"Well, drop it out, and I'll run right down and get it. Have you done it yet, have you dropped it, Thirza?"

"I'm just doing it."

"And, Thirza, if Mamma asks you about the thing—I don't suppose she will, I'm sure she won't—but if she does, you won't say anything, will you? I mean, about my lending it to you. You won't tell, will you, Thirza?"

"No."

"Promise."

"All right," Thirza said. "I promise."

She looked out of the window again. There was nobody in sight. "Miss Susan," she said, "will you tell Manson that I'm very hungry and ask her, please, to send me up something to eat." She listened. "Miss Susan!"

But Susan had already gone.

CHAPTER V

(1)

IT WAS NOT UNTIL THE following morning that the Carmichaels decided on their line of action. Richard Carmichael's lawyer, Mr. Harkness, Town Clerk of Kaysie, arrived at 9 a.m.: two hours later Thirza and Manson were summoned to the Study.

The Study was a high, bare, carpetless room. The walls were hung with maps of Kaysie and district, embellished like the maps of a campaigning general with cryptic signs in red ink and small flagged pins. These markings denoted Richard Carmichael's properties and interests, and their extent was considerable. The furniture of the room consisted of a large green safe, lettered THOMAS MILNER, FIREPROOF, a walnut bookcase containing an impressive library of books on Scots and Mercantile Law, a walnut double chest with thirty-six locking compartments, and an enormous flat-topped walnut desk built on pedestals of drawers. This desk jutted out like a peninsula and dominated the room. It stood in the corner farthest from the door, and the rest of the furniture was grouped around it, safe and armoire against the left wall, bookcase on the right.

When you walked up to that desk you had a most uncomfortable feeling; it was such a long way off and your heels clopped like hooves on the slippery, polished floor, and you did not dare to step out boldly for fear of slipping. By the time you reached Richard Carmichael at the desk you were extremely conscious of yourself, and even when you had a good case to argue, you tended to state it badly. Richard Carmichael once told an intimate that his Study was worth a thousand a year to him, and no doubt it was. A tenant thought twice before he carried a grievance across that glittering expanse of floor, and many a business man, summoned to Carmichael House to discuss terms, dropped his price a quarter as he minced the twenty paces between door and desk.

On this Monday morning, when Sinclair marched Manson and

Thirza up to the desk, Mr. Carmichael and Mr. Harkness were already seated behind it, and a few moments later Mistress Carmichael slid into the room, and moving with the grace of a skater, took up her stance at Mr. Carmichael's elbow.

"Now," Richard Carmichael said, "I wish this to be as brief as possible." He spoke to Manson. "Am I correct in assuming that, besides ourselves, you are the only person who knows of this unfortunate business?"

"Yes, sir," said Manson, who now knew not only what really had happened to Thirza, but also what the Carmichaels mistakenly thought had happened.

"I would like Gare's assurance of that."

"Did you tell anybody else, Thirza?"

Thirza shook her head. She had not raised her face since she entered the door, but she contrived nevertheless to know that Mr. Harkness was pulling at his moustaches, that Mistress Carmichael was frowning and fidgeting, and that Mr. Carmichael was studying her in the same keen impersonal way as he studied the pieces on his chess-board.

"This point is of importance," Mr. Harkness said, blustering, his voice gruff and broad, spreading through the room, in marked contrast to Mr. Carmichael's precise clipped voice which hit its target cleanly and stopped there. "It must be clearly established. The girl must be prepared to sign that she has told no one but this woman." He shuffled his papers. "This woman—ah—Manson."

"This girl will sign anything I tell her to," Mr. Carmichael said coldly.

Mr. Harkness said, "That's all verra well, Mr. Carmichael. . . ."

"Now, Gare," Richard Carmichael said. "Look at this." Thirza was aware of the movement of his hands on the desk. "Look at this, and tell me: have you seen it before?"

She raised her eyes only far enough to see the object. It was the pale-blue embroidered square of silk which Susan had lent her for the revival. She did not speak.

"Answer me. Have you seen it before?"

She thought of her promise to Susan.

"Have you ever seen it?"

"No, sir," she said.

"Well, that's a lie," Janet Carmichael said hotly. "The girl's lying, Richard. Why, when M'selle found it and brought it to me, I saw at once that it had been worn, and I saw the candle-grease on the corner, and where else could that candle-grease have come from if not from the tallow candles at the church? . . ."

"If you please, Janet. Please."

"Well, Richard," Janet Carmichael said, "everybody knows how the candles at the church are always dripping, and, goodness knows, our candles don't drip. I mean, it couldn't have happened in the house now, could it? And besides, who else could have taken it? Who else had the chance to take it? And anyway, really Richard, what's the sense of asking her these questions when we *know* for certain from Mrs. MacGregor and what's-her-name, her sister, that she definitely, quite definitely, was wearing this at the revival. I mean to say, Richard. . . ."

"Janet," her husband said. "I don't care what you mean to say. Will you kindly hold your tongue and let me conduct this enquiry in my own way."

"Very well, Richard."

"Now, Gare," Richard Carmichael said, "can you explain the fact that, though you say you have never seen this article before, Mrs. MacGregor and Miss Cowie have stated on oath to my solicitor that you were wearing this silk square as a headdress at the Revival Meeting on Saturday night?"

"This particular square and no other," Mr. Harkness interjected.

Thirza remained silent.

"Can you explain it?"

"No."

"Of course she can explain it," Janet Carmichael said. "She's a liar, that's the explanation. After all I've done for her, the kindnesses; my word, really, when I think of it, it makes me . . ."

"Janet!"

"I'm sorry, Richard. I was only pointing out that of course this girl knows perfectly well what the explanation is, and really, Richard, I know you don't want me to interrupt, but I must say in my view——"

"Janet, if you say another word I shall have to ask you to leave the room."

"Richard!"

"I mean that, my dear."

"Well, really, I don't think that's any way to speak to me, Richard, and in front of Mr. Harkness too, and these—these servants."

"Allow me," Richard Carmichael said, "to be the judge of what is the best way to speak to you. And allow me to remind you for the last time that *I* am conducting this enquiry. And now, Gare, are you prepared to admit that you wore this article, or do you wish me to send for the servants who can identify it as having been worn by you on Saturday evening?"

"Mrs. MacGregor and—Cowie," Mr. Harkness said, consulting his notes.

"Are you prepared to admit that you wore it?"

"Yes, sir," Thirza said. "I wore it."

"Then you have admitted, in fact, that you are a liar. You are also, on your own confession, a thief."

"If Thirza wore that thing," Manson said, "and 'pears she did, I've nae doot but that she only borrowed it, and that disna . . ."

"Please be quiet. Do you realise, Gare, that you could be sentenced to a term of imprisonment for theft?"

"The Court," Mr. Harkness said. "The Court has been taking a severe view of petty thieving, particularly in cases such as this, where there has been a violation of trust. I might almost say"—with a respectful nod to Mistress Carmichael—"of a sacred trust. I have no doubt that in this particular case, in view of Mistress Carmichael's unsurpassed local reputation as a kind and generous mistress, and in view of her particular and exceptional kindnesses to this particular girl, I have no hesitation in saying that the sentence would be at the least from three to six years' detention and might also include transportation."

Manson said, "Ye're a gomeril, man. There's nae use tryin' to stop me, Mr. Carmichael, sir. I'll say my say, an' that's this. The lassie's nae thief, an' fine you ken it; an' suppose she did borra this bit silk stuff, well, she pit it back where she got it, did she nae? An' ye canna tell me that ony court in Scotland would send her to prison, na na, nor even go to the bather o' tryin' her. Ye're oot to scare the lassie, an' that's the lang and the short o't, but ye're nae

fleggin' me. As for this lawyer billie wi' his particlers and his bow-wows and his tongue waggin' like a lamb's tail—weel, as far as I'm consairned, he can keep his fish guts for his ain sea-maws." She cocked her head and looked straight at him. "Windbag," she said placidly.

"There is no suggestion," Richard Carmichael said, quick to cut off the Town Clerk's indignant reply, "no suggestion that I intend to enforce the law against Gare. Mr. Harkness merely meant to point out that, if we wished to prosecute, the penalty would in all probability be a severe one. That is what you meant to imply, Mr. Harkness, is it not?"

"Precisely, sir. Precisely."

"I have no intention of taking the matter to law, however. Be quiet, Janet. And you can consider yourself fortunate on that account, Gare."

Mr. Harkness said, "Not many employers would show such generosity." With a special glare for Manson. "Such magnanimity."

"I am not prepared, however, to allow you to remain in my household. You have abused your mistress's trust. You have shown yourself to be a liar, and you have confessed to being a thief. It is because of your dishonesty that I am dismissing you from Carmichael House. There is no other reason whatsoever. You are being dismissed solely for dishonesty. I wish you both to understand that."

"Fegs, I understand it fine," Manson said dryly.

Richard Carmichael gave her a shrewd glance. "Very well," he said. "Now, Gare, I wish you to sign a paper which Mr. Harkness has made out. This paper states simply that you confess to an act of dishonesty, that you are leaving Mistress Carmichael's service of your own accord, and that you make and will make no claim of any kind whatsoever on Mistress Carmichael or"—he emphasised the words—"*on any member of this household* either now or at any future date."

"She'll sign nothing," Manson said.

"In return for your signature, I guarantee not to prosecute for theft."

"She'll nae sign," Manson said stubbornly.

"I am also prepared," Richard Carmichael said, after a considered pause, "to make her a small payment."

"It's unnecessary to make any payment, sir," Mr. Harkness protested. "Mr. Carmichael, I assure you that, in law, the girl has no case. No solicitor in the district would touch it. As far as the law is concerned . . ."

"I am not concerned with the law, Harkness. Public opinion is another matter, and I wish this to be settled amicably and discreetly."

"Mr. Harkness is quite right," Janet Carmichael said hotly. "You shouldn't pay her a penny, Richard."

"Hold your tongue, Janet. I repeat, I am willing to make a small payment. And as you, Mistress Manson, are directly implicated, I am willing to make a small payment to you also. Harkness, have you the paper which you made out for Mistress Manson to sign? Will you kindly read it aloud?"

"Never mind the readin'," Manson said. "How much?"

"I had thought of ten pounds."

"Far too generous," Mr. Harkness said. "Far too generous. I suggest five pounds, although I repeat, from a legal point of view no payment whatsoever is necessary."

Manson shook her head. She wanted to demand fifty. She had set her heart on fifty pounds whenever she had seen where this conversation was leading, but fifty pounds was a fortune, and she could not get her lips to form the words. She went on shaking her head.

Mr. Carmichael watched her shrewdly. "I meant ten pounds each," he said.

He didn't mean ten pounds each, she thought. He's offering that now only because he sees me shaking my head. That lawyer's watchin' me like a hawk. He said it was unnecessary to make any payment, but now he'd like fine for me to take the money and sign his paper. An' I winna dee't. *Mistress Manson,* forsooth. Richard Carmichael never spoke so nice to me afore, and why should he speak nicely now of all times? Because he's feart o' me, that's why. Feart. . . .

"Harkness," Mr. Carmichael said, producing a bunch of keys from his pocket and nipping one off from the others between thumb and forefinger, "get me my large cash-box from the safe. . . . Yes, I'm willing to pay ten pounds to each of you."

I *will* ask for fifty, Manson thought. I will! She opened her

mouth to say fifty, determined to say fifty, and Mr. Carmichael nodded complacently as if the matter was already settled. "Ten pounds," he said. "Scotch."

"No," she heard herself say. "I want a hundred."

There was silence in the room. Mr. Carmichael had not moved a muscle, but Mistress Carmichael jerked her head, and Mr. Harkness stopped in his tracks with his arm stretched towards the safe, rigid as a railway signal.

"One hundred pounds," Manson said stubbornly, dropping the words one by one into the silence.

"Well, now," Richard Carmichael said, "a hundred pounds is a lot of money."

And she knew in that moment, in a flicker of intuition, that she would get it. Exhilaration rose in her like a flare. She said quickly, "A hundred pounds each." She could hardly credit that it was her own voice speaking. She saw their eyes, and she saw Thirza's open mouth. "A hundred pounds to me," she said. "And a hundred pounds to the lassie."

Voices flared up, raked her in a savage cross-fire. "Ridiculous . . . fool . . . blackmail . . . mad . . . criminal." Janet Carmichael's voice and the lawyer's voice. Abusive voices clattering discordantly together. She paid no attention. She watched Richard Carmichael.

Richard Carmichael had not spoken. He fitted his finger-tips together to form an arch, raised this arch to an upright position and examined it. Then he examined her, his eyes flat and expressionless. He said, at length, "And for two hundred pounds you will sign these papers: Gare will engage to bring no claim of any kind, note, no claim of any kind whatsoever against any member of my family, either now or in the future, and you will both keep absolute silence regarding this arrangement and the incident which preceded it? Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir. There's jist one thing mair. We also want a month's wages each, in advance, and references. Good references."

"Never!" Janet Carmichael said. "Never! The girl's a slut and a liar and a thief, and if I put pen to paper I shall say so."

"You will say nothing of the sort, Janet. Give me the papers, Harkness."

"I thought it advisable," Mr. Harkness said, "to insert a clause

here"—he stubbed it with a finger—"to the effect, specifying that she (Gare) has not on any occasion been alone, unaccompanied, in the presence of any male member of the household. A valuable precaution, Mr. Carmichael. Makes the case, I might say, water-tight."

Richard Carmichael read the clause in silence.

"You approve, I trust?"

Richard Carmichael grunted. Retaining one sheet, he thrust the other across the desk. He said to Manson, "Sign at the foot in the space opposite the word SIGNATURE. You can read it first if you like. You had better know what you are signing."

"And our wages?" Manson asked.

"A month's wages will be paid to each of you."

"And the references?"

"Yes, yes. I have accepted your terms. All you have to do is to inscribe your signature at the foot of the page."

"If you don't mind, sir," Manson said. "I'll have the money first."

"In that case," Mr. Carmichael said, "you will have to accept a draft on my bank."

"I'd rather have the money, if you please, sir."

"Do you mean to say that you do not accept my cheque?"

"Na na, sir; I'm nae sayin' naething o' the kind. It's jist that I dinna understand banks, an' sichlike, and I'd rather have the money in siller, if you please."

"But you surely don't expect me to be able to produce over two hundred pounds in cash?"

"Preposterous!" Mr. Harkness said.

"Why, I don't suppose I have half that amount in the house."

"You could send to the bank, sir," Manson suggested.

Richard Carmichael plucked at the taut blue flesh on his chin. "All right," he said. "I'll send to the bank, and meantime you and Gare can sign these two papers. Pass the quills, Janet."

"If it's all the same to you, sir, we'll jist wait till the money comes."

He gave her a cool, hard look, and she nodded, smiling ingratiatingly. "We'll jist wait a bittie till the money comes, an' then we'll baith of us sign your papers for you, sir."

Richard Carmichael sighed. "Harkness," he said. "Open up the safe and take out the cash-box, the big one, and bring it to me. And my keys."

"Keys?" Mr. Harkness said.

"They're in the safe, man . . . in the lock."

Richard Carmichael slowly lifted the lid of the cash-box, while Thirza stared uncomprehendingly at a pool of light on the floor, and Manson watched with a beatific smile. When he began to erect sovereigns in columns of ten on the desk, her excitement became intense, and pimples of sweat broke out on her brow, but she retained a grip on practical affairs.

"Also," she said, "we'll be needin' the chaise, Mr. Carmichael, to transport us and our belongings and all this siller into Kaysie."

Janet Carmichael covered her face with her hands and began to cry.

"We'll want the chaise, sir," Manson insisted.

Richard Carmichael looked up. His face was set in rigid angles and veins were visible, like worms, on his forehead.

"The chaise," she said.

He dropped his eyes to the sovereigns. His hand trembled violently as he resumed the building of a golden column, and his voice lurched from his mouth as though he had been drinking. "Certainly," he said.

(2)

Thirza and Manson left Carmichael House shortly after noon. They drove off by chaise, as grand as any pair of ladies, with £200 in a small sealed bag inside a locked trunk and their month's wages in the pockets of their Sunday clothes. Manson still clutched their excellent testimonials, and as the chaise drove off, she fanned herself with these documents and waved roguishly to Mr. Sinclair, who had come to the door to savour his triumph, and who now anxiously asked himself whether he had triumphed after all.

Manson slapped Thirza on the back. "Lassie," she cried. "We're rich!" And she drummed her heels on the tin box which contained their wealth. "Rich! It's a miracle!"

"It's a miracle all right," Thirza said, "and I don't know yet how you did it. . . ."

"I was inspired," Manson said. "Fair inspired. . . ."

"But I do know this," Thirza interrupted. "If you'd asked for twice as much you'd have got it."

Manson stared at her, pricked into thought. "I believe you're right," she said slowly. "Fegs, I believe I would!"

Thirza giggled. The sound shocked her, and she cut it sharply off. She hadn't laughed, giggled, or smiled since the Awful Thing had happened, or nearly happened, in the caravan. She doubted if she ever would again. Nevertheless, another giggle surged up inside her, and she couldn't hold it back. Manson blinked rapidly, and she also began to laugh. The chaise bowled merrily along the Kaysie Road, and, inside, the old woman and the young woman clung to each other and laughed till they could laugh no more.

(3)

When Janet Carmichael learned that Thirza was not pregnant and that Robert's refusal to deny anything had arisen solely from injured pride—that, in fact, the only thing which had passed between them was books, she was more relieved than angry. As it was inconvenient to remember, she soon forgot, first, what she had suspected, and then, what actually had happened. She genuinely came to believe that the only reason she had dismissed Thirza Gare was that she had found the girl to be dishonest. She could not remember what she had stolen. She had an idea only that it was something valuable. She said, vaguely, some piece of jewellery.

Richard Carmichael reacted differently. He was an astute and hard-headed business man who hated to part with a penny, and when he learned the true facts of the case, that his honour had not been involved and that there had been no obligation upon him to pay a brass farthing either to Manson or to Gare, he flew into a great rage, tore up the two documents which these ladies had signed, and told his wife precisely what he thought of her. He thought little of her, and still less of Manson and Gare. He used a very ugly word to describe them.

He had a better memory than his wife. He docketed Thirza Gare, Hannah Manson, and their two hundred pounds neatly into his mind for future reference. He prided himself on being a just man. He did not forget or forgive an injury: he repaid it.

CHAPTER VI

(1)

MANSON AND THIRZA SET UP house together in Kaysie Fishertown. Their new home was hard by the Ropery, and was one of a row of cottages fronting the harbour on the Low Shore. It was distinguished from its neighbours in that it had an extra room, a corrugated-iron roof, and wooden floors. The rent was £2 5*s*. per annum.

They liked the house very well. They liked to stand at the door and watch the bustle when a ship came into harbour, and they did not dislike the ceaseless hum of activity from the Ropery next door. From the back window they looked out on the long rope-walk, where the boys sat turning the big hand-wheels and the spinners, with streaks of hackled hemp wrapped round their waists, walked backwards and forwards, drawing out the fibre, throwing off the spun yarn on to the big trestle combs, and calling out periodically in high sing-song voices to the boys to stop their wheels. From their back window they saw, too, the great tarring tank, and, on the days when the fire was lit beneath it, Thirza liked to watch the strands of rope being drawn through the boiling tar, and was not offended by the rich heavy odour which, much to Manson's irritation, seeped into the house through her sealed windows.

This smell of tarring rope was Manson's only complaint. Otherwise, she was childishly delighted with the house. It had always been her ambition to have a home of her own, and now that she had one, her pride and her industry knew no bounds. She worked unceasingly. She scrubbed. She polished. She shifted the furniture an inch this way and an inch that. She purchased small ornaments and arranged them with mathematical precision. She spent a large part of the day on her knees, and when on her feet she was for ever stepping back to admire. She was almost completely happy.

Thirza was not so content. She enjoyed the novelty of moving into the new house, but once the furnishing was over she began to

be bored with the pattern of domestic life. Manson was too efficient. There was never anything for Thirza to do, and she became increasingly restless and uneasy. She went daily to the Daft Dominie's hovel in the Suckie Moor for lessons, and applied herself with great diligence to her work, but this did not prevent her from fretting. Now that she had a wider knowledge of life she felt that it was not enough merely to be educating herself. Her conscience troubled her and she had a continual sense of guilt. She felt that a girl of her age ought to be working, really working, earning money, shaping a place for herself in the world. . . . She began to look for work. She found it at Skene's.

Skene's Fish Curing Yard was the oldest business in the Fishertown. It was situated against the cliffs at the western limit of the Low Shore, and contained an acre and a half of ground within a tarred wooden fence some seven feet high. Inside, there were the usual offices of a curing yard—farlins, cooper's shop, fish-house, kiln, packing-shed, office, and large roofed-in store. It was a big business. When the herring season was at its height Skene's might employ as many as fifty persons, and when there were exceptionally big catches, these fifty persons worked in shifts all through the night.

It was because of the abnormal fishing that year that Thirza was first employed. She was taken on as a packer's assistant, and assigned to a gaunt, tactiturn, betel-brown woman christened Agnes Sievwright and known as Agsiv. Agsiv was in charge of one of the eight crews then working at Skene's. She was a packer, and the other two members of her crew, Liz and Jannet, were gutters. They were both elderly women who complained of the stiffness of their joints, yet they thought nothing of gutting some thirty-five crans—more than 30,000 herrings—in a ten-hour day.

Thirza's duties were very humble.

When the herrings arrived in the yard they were emptied into the long trough or farlin and lightly dusted with salt for easier handling. The gutters stood round the farlin, snatching up the herrings, ripping out gills and stomach with deft flicks of their knives, and dropping the gutted fish, according to classification—*full, mattie,* or *spent*—into three baskets at their sides. Thirza carried the filled baskets to Agsiv, who sat surrounded by rousing

tubs, one for each class of fish. Agsiv emptied the baskets into the tubs, sprinkled the fish with coarse salt, and began to pack them into a barrel. This looked very easy, but was, in fact, a skilled and responsible job on which the success of the cure depended, for these barrels of herrings, destined perhaps for Russia or the West Indies, might not be opened for many months, and their condition then would depend entirely on the skill with which they had been packed.

Agsiv would lay herrings in the bottom of the barrel—on their backs if the consignment was to the Baltic, on their sides if to Ireland—and then she would fill the barrel with alternate layers of salt and tight-packed herrings until the barrel was quite topped up. It was now Thirza's job to fetch the cooper—not any cooper, but their own special cooper who was responsible for four crews' work—Jamie Cruden, by name, Jeems, a gangling good-natured man with a prominent nose around which he would drape a finger like a collar on a hook, while he thought up something funny to say. Jeems marked each barrel with the crew's number and the date of the cure, fixed a loose cover on its top, and trundled it off to the shed.

After two days—three if the second day fell on a Sunday—the barrels were opened, and, as the herrings had always pined or shrunk at least a full tier and were now floating in pickle, the excess of pickle was poured off, and each barrel was topped up with the requisite number of herrings of the same type and of the same day's cure. The head was replaced, the hoops were tightened, and the barrel was left on its side. After a period of fifteen days the barrel was upended, the pickle vent was opened, and the pickle was run off the upper half. The head was again removed, fresh salt was scattered in at the sides, and the top layers of herrings were rearranged and pressed down so that the barrel was exactly filled. The head was fitted again, the pickle was replaced as necessary, the barrel was blown and bunged tight, and the curing marks were scratched on. The cure was now ready for the Crown Brand, the Fishery Officer's stamp which certified the contents of a barrel, and without which an exporter could seldom find a market for a consignment of his herrings.

There was one stage in the cure which Thirza regarded with

revulsion, and this was the *dunting* or final pressing down of the herrings, which took place when the barrels were opened for the last time.

A round wooden disc, almost as big as the head of the barrel, was fitted on top of the herrings, and one of the younger girls in the yard was lifted on to the *dunt,* and, by stamping on it, pressed down the excess of salt so that the head of the barrel could be replaced.

When the girls stood on the barrel *dunting,* it was the custom for the apprentice coopers, chanting and clapping their hands, to gather round and tease the girls to dance. If they happened to catch a glimpse of an ankle—and the girls rarely denied them this small privilege—they would break into delighted guffaws, bait the lass on the dunt into an exchange of insults, and enjoy a mildly ribald badinage until Sandy Flett, the foreman, very old but still with an eye for an ankle himself, came to shoo them back to work.

It was innocent fun, but Thirza would not join in it. Since her narrow escape from Ezekiel Fleming she had a fear of men which she disguised from herself by calling it "a disgust." She told herself that she hated men. She wanted to have nothing whatsoever to do with them, and it was a great ordeal for her to stand on the dunt inside a circle of chaffing boys. She considered the whole affair beastly; and the boys, seeing from her prim movements and her stiff face that she would not enter into the spirit of the game and was determined not to reveal an inch, teased her all the more unmercifully, and even enlisted the aid of some of the older men to goad her into showing a leg.

To get young Thirza Gare dunting became a popular amusement in the yard, and soon Thirza found that she was expected to dunt not only Agsiv's barrels, but those of the other packers also. Perched on a barrel, surrounded by a good-natured, mocking crowd, she would stare into the middle distance with a strained, aloof expression on her face, applying her weight to the dunt only by a modest bending and straightening of her clenched knees. Most of the women in the yard joined freely in the banter, but there were some who thought she was making too much of herself, and those women watched with hard faces or, joining in the chaff, introduced into it an obscene and vicious note.

There was sometimes so much merriment when Thirza got up to dunt that the noise percolated through the whole yard. The coopers would leave off sawing and hammering and come out of the shop to see what was going on, the clerks would throw open the office windows and lean out to join in the fun, and Mr. Skene himself would sometimes come to the outside office door to ask what all the noise was about.

It was the clerks who brought matters to a head. The clerks were from Kaysie, and, generally speaking, kept themselves to themselves and did not mix with the fisher-girls, but they became interested in Thirza's dunting and Thirza's excessive modesty, and one of them—Bill Donald, a tall, handsome young man whose presence in the yard always caused the girls to dig each other in the ribs—devised the scheme of stimulating Thirza's skirts with a cooper's stave.

This was duly done, and, amid vociferous applause, Thirza's skirts were well and truly lifted, whereupon, crimson but still sedate in her movements, she descended from the barrel, advanced with deliberation on Master Donald and struck him a very competent and resounding slap on the left cheek.

"And now," she said, "I'll not go back on the dunt unless you promise to leave me alone."

But Mr. Donald, sheepish because the laugh had been turned on him, would not promise to leave her alone. On the contrary, he said, he would put her skirts right over her head.

Thirza promptly laid a complaint before the foreman.

Sandy Flett tugged his beard, grinning like an old goat, and said, "Weel noo, this is a serious maitter, an' I dinna ken that my authority, as ye micht say, extends this far. It's mair like a maitter for Mr. Skene himsel'."

Before anyone could stop her Thirza had marched through the office and burst into Mr. Skene's private room.

Mr. Skene heard her out in silence. He was a small, quiet, middle-aged man with shrewd, kindly eyes, and a humorous face which puckered up easily into smiles.

"You have an excellent case," he said gravely, "and you have stated it well. I shall give it my most earnest consideration."

He was highly amused, but took no steps in the matter beyond

asking old Mortimer, his head clerk, what Thirza's name was and how long she had been working in the yard.

Thirza's drastic action was enough in itself, however. From that day on she was baited with caution, and no one ever dared to touch her clothing again. Nevertheless, she took no risks. She practised her dunting movements before the mirror at home, and actually went to the length of sewing weights into the bottom seams of her skirts. She became so adept at dunting modestly that the coopers gave up hope of her ankles and tired of the joke. But she had left her imprint on the yard. Everyone now knew her by name, and knew that she was *different*. To some of the young men she had become a symbol of inviolability, and, though they ceased to tease her, they did not cease to be aware of her.

(2)

In the middle of July Liz, the elder of the two gutters in Agsiv's crew, absent-mindedly cut the top joint off the middle finger of the left hand, and, since all the experienced gutters were now at work either in Skene's or in the other yards, Thirza was promoted temporarily to gutter.

Thirza buckled to. She studied gutting as no one had ever studied gutting before. She watched and compared the finger movements of all the most expert gutters. She limbered and manipulated her own fingers with the diligence of a concert pianist. She was first to arrive at the yard and last to leave. She spoke, thought, and dreamed gutting, and even in her most precious leisure moments, when visiting the Daft Dominie, for instance, she would, to his great irritation, combine business with pleasure by going through the motions of gutting while parsing a Shakespearean sentence or construing a passage from Cæsar. She was for ever holding imaginary herrings, belly up, in her left hand, thrusting an imaginary knife into the imaginary throat, pulling upwards on gut and gip to preserve the breast and leave the Crown gut intact, and catching in the hollow of her hand an imaginary heap of offal compounded of gills, fins, heart, and liver. The act was so real to her that she sometimes dropped the imaginary gutted fish into an imaginary basket and bent to snatch another from the imaginary farlin.

One day the Dominie laid down the notebook from which he had been reading to her, knelt by her side, scooped up nothing in his cupped hands, carried it to the door, and carefully deposited it outside.

"What are you doing?" Thirza asked, amazed.

"It's just the offal," he said. "I am putting it out. I haven't much liking for the smell of fish in the house."

"But," she said. "But." And she saw the twinkle in his eyes and laughed. "I'm sorry," she said. "If you don't like to see me practising, I won't do it any more."

She sat motionless, listening to the Dominie's rendering of a poem after the style of Juvenal, not one word of which she understood. After a few minutes her hands began to twitch and she thrust them guiltily beneath her haunches. But soon she found reason to blow her nose, and so her hands escaped again, and, having stowed her handkerchief, resumed their task, gutting with extra vigour to make up for lost time.

Inevitably, she became an efficient gutter, and once, when Jannet had an off day, she gutted thirteen barrels to Jannet's twelve. She announced this with much pride to Manson, who said, "Oh yes?" and smiled vaguely at her new Welsh dresser. "Now hurry and get cleaned up, 'cos the meat's ready to lift. It's pickled pork the nicht."

Thirza got cleaned up. She spent a lot of time washing these days, for she invariably came home caked with fish scales, and even after she had thoroughly soaked her hands and arms, a faint smell of fish still clung to her. For her own part she did not mind it: she had been brought up so close to fish that she took their smell for granted, but Manson had a sensitive nose, and in order to prevent Manson from sniffing insinuatingly all evening, she would scrub herself to the waist in the ingle-nook and present her nude, towel-reddened body to the older woman to be smelled and passed.

Periodically they had mild arguments about Thirza's work. Manson did not approve of it. She saw no need, she said, for Thirza to do dirty, common work like gutting. She granted that, sooner or later, they would both have to find jobs, but meantime they were rich and could afford to sit back and wait until the right kind of job turned up. Manson's idea of the right kind of job was very definite.

It was simply one where they could be together as housekeeper and lady's-maid to a genteel and, preferably, elderly mistress.

"For instance," she would say meaningly. "Lady Greenskyre's housekeeper must be getting verra, verra old."

Thirza would shake her head. She had had enough of service, and though she did not like to say so flatly to a lifelong servant like Manson, she was determined not to go back to it. She had enjoyed her spell as a lady's-maid and she had learned a great deal from it, but she did not mean ever again to be at anyone's beck and call or to risk such humiliation as she had undergone at Carmichael House. She wanted to be free and independent. She had no intention of spending the rest of her life gutting, but she would gut fish or do any other dirty job rather than go back into service.

(3)

When the herring season came to an end Thirza was paid off, and she then applied herself with renewed zeal to her studies. Throughout the winter she trudged daily, sometimes in deep snow, sometimes in driving rain, across Suckie Moor to the Dominie's hovel. She was always sure of a welcome, for she always took with her a pail containing food and a bottle of Manson's home-brewed ale. Sometimes the Dominie was in bed, but she rooted him out, and, having tidied and fed him, set his nose to the grindstone.

She soon discovered that she was not interested in Latin, and she refused point-blank to tackle Greek. She wanted to learn only what was plainly of use. She tackled mathematics bravely, seeing its necessity, but what she liked best was what the Dominie called the Study of Humanity, a hotch-potch of history, geography, and a weird miscellany of knowledge culled from the Dominie's wide reading. She rummaged among the Dominie's rubble of books and read everything light enough to carry home. She read gluttonously, sometimes devouring an entire volume of five or six hundred pages in a long day, and what she read she remembered—not broadly, but in formidable detail.

(4)

In November of that year the Fishertown was laid with pipes for gas, and one of the gas lamps was erected within six feet of the

house occupied by Mistresses Manson and Gare. On Christmas Eve, 1859, the final arrangements were completed, and at 6.30 p.m. Jake Croll, newly appointed lamp-lighter to the Fishertown, accompanied by Sam Sievwright, who had been lighting the Kaysie lamps for years, marched round the Fishertown igniting the jets. This simple act was greeted with much acclaim. Nothing in Thirza's lifetime had given so much pleasure to the folks of the Fishertown; and nothing in her adolescence gave Thirza herself more pleasure, for now she could sit at the window and read all night.

CHAPTER VII

(1)

IN THIRZA'S SECOND SEASON AS a gutter at Skene's a strange ship dropped anchor in Kaysie Bay. She was a Yankee clipper ship, but a clipper the like of which had never been seen in the Moray Frith. She had a low Baltimore freeboard, high raking masts, and a fearful sheer, and she mounted a long Tom amidships. She had a lean and lethal look. She was black from stem to stern; her masts and yards were black from the trucks down, and even her figure-head, a voluptuous female, was draped (although inadequately) in garments of black. She was the *Foolish Virgin*—captain, the notorious Red Dirk Stullen—and she was known to seamen all over the sea-fronts of the world.

Captain Stullen belied his reputation. He killed no one. He stole nothing. And, although he drank a great deal and took his pleasure of certain of the ladies of the town, he paid for his drinks, and his pleasures too, and sought both only where he was welcome. His men behaved with equal discretion. They were an ugly crew—Chinese, American negroes, Finns, Dutchmen—and they stalked the town as though they owned it, but they came ashore unarmed and kept within the letter of the law.

The Town Council invited a visit by the coastguard cutter from Aberdeen, demanded reinforcements for the local garrison, and sent urgent despatches to Edinburgh. It was hoped to receive authority to apprehend Stullen, but the reply from Edinburgh was disappointing. Captain Stullen might be sought for offences against most of the realms that bordered the seas from the Caribbean to the Bering, but for the time being he was not wanted in the British Isles. He was at perfect liberty to stroll down the High Street with his hands in the pockets of his short reefer coat, to buy a pound of baccy in Reid's, to order hand-made boots at Ogilvie's, to start a great pother of activity at the flesher's with his

order for fifty well-cured hams. There was no legal reason why he should not spend his time and his money in the *Black Bull,* which he had adopted as his headquarters ashore. He and some of his officers and most of his crew were to be found there every night; and respectable folk, hearing the sounds of their carousal—the laughter and the songs and the screams of tarts—spoke of the goings-on with bated breath and made long detours to avoid passing the *Bull.*

As the days wore into the shape of a month and as no serious misdemeanour was committed either by Captain Stullen or his men, the taut, nervous air of the town gradually slackened, men permitted their womenfolk to walk out again unaccompanied, and some of the tradesmen, meeting Captain Stullen in the street, even began to touch their forelocks to him.

Then the French came. The French came to the Frith every year. They came for the herring fishing, and the people of the Fishertown were usually glad to see them. No one ever grudged the Frenchies the little that they caught. They were indifferent fishermen, and preferred to buy their herrings rather than go to the trouble of fishing for them. They would lie off the harbour mouth, accost the local fleet as it returned from a night's fishing, offer and pay higher prices than could be obtained ashore, and load in herrings from the Scotch boats in full view of the Fishertown. Whenever they had filled their holds they would set sail for France, returning weekly throughout the season, perfectly satisfied with their profit as middlemen between the Scotch fishermen and their own guillible Government, which, anxious to promote the herring fishing into a major national industry, paid a substantial bounty on all herrings "caught" by French fishermen.

There was hardly a home in the Fishertown which did not show some small sign of the annual visits of the French. It might be a piece of crystalline glaze from Limoges, a scrap of silk Normandy lace, an ornamental perfume sachet, or merely exotic empty bottles which had once contained burgundy or claret or champagne, and which now served as decorative candle-holders. The women would smile slyly when the French herring-boats were sighted in the Bay, and their menfolk, doing business with the French, would seldom fail to barter part of their catch for wines and feminine gee-gaws.

These arrangements pleased everyone, and harmed nobody but the exciseman.

There was only one issue between the people of the Fishertown and the French sailors, and this one issue arose only when the fishing was bad.

The French were in the habit of curing their herrings on board ship and of dumping the refuse, and, although the Scotch fishermen repeatedly warned them that this refuse polluted the sea and scared the herring shoals from the coast, the French merely shrugged their shoulders at such a stupid foreign superstition and continued to dump the herring viscera overboard in the dark. In the years when the fishing was good it was a debatable point whether this pollution really did scare off the herrings, but, in the years when the shoals did not come inshore and the fishing was bad, there was no doubt at all in anyone's mind that pollution was part of the cause and that the French were to blame. This particular year the fishing was very bad. Night after night the fishermen went out hopefully—only to return next morning with empty nets. The folks of the Fishertown became anxious and irritable. The men took to wearing pieces of silver in their boots. They spat on their hearths and nailed horseshoes to their masts, while the women religiously threw salt after their menfolk as they left for the fishing, and carefully refrained from combing their hair after nightfall. These devices failed to placate the evil spirits. The fishing continued to be bad. Hunger and fear stalked the Fishertown, and tempers wore dangerously thin. All the exasperation of the past few weeks now began to be concentrated on the French, and there were ugly incidents between the local fishermen and the sailors of the French fleet.

It was because of one of these incidents that Thirza met Captain Stullen.

She was coming home from the yard late one August evening (having stayed to listen to a coopers' discussion on the relative merits of larch and oak) when she became aware of a great commotion at the far end of the Shore, by the harbour. She immediately set her nose to it. She could not see what was happening for the swarming loop of people that encircled the entrance to the North Pier, but she recognised the signs and the sounds of a fight, and she picked up her skirts and raced towards it. . . .

She elbowed into the crowd.

"Fa's fecthin'?" she demanded.

"The French."

It had started when a gang of youths, lounging at the end of the pier, had seen a small boat row off from one of the French ships anchored outside the harbour and had decided to prevent its crew from landing. They had done this without undue difficulty. They had merely kicked the first Frenchman in the face as, climbing the iron rungs let into the pier, he had poked his head over the wall. It was an easy victory.

An hour later five French boats, each loaded with men—the entire crews of the three French ships in the Bay—bore down on the harbour; and the Fishertown lads, seeing them coming, beat a hasty retreat. Willie Bowie, apprentice sail-maker, who knew nothing of what had happened, had stopped at the foot of the pier on his way home from the loft to watch this army of Frenchmen pass. He had made some perfectly innocent remark about frogs' spawn and they had set on him, beaten him up, and thrown him into the harbour. This was the sort of provocation that the Fishertown had been waiting for. Before the Frenchmen had reached the Brig on their way to Kaysie, they were intercepted by an avenging band of fishermen twice their number, who dropped down to the Shore road from the braehead, cutting the French off from the bridge.

Battle was immediately joined, and the French were driven, contesting every yard, back along the Shore to the harbour and up the North Pier.

When Thirza arrived the fight was at its fiercest, for the French could now retreat no farther and were making a last desperate stand to avoid being pushed over the end of the pier into the sea. There was continuous uproar as the crowd, enclosing the French like a huge gaping scissors, edged slowly forward, shouting advice and encouragement to its champions and, although ostensibly non-combatant, taking every opportunity to impede, trip, kick, or beat any Frenchman driven on to its pincers.

Thirza bored into the press of spectators, exploiting every gap, seizing every crevice between bodies to wedge in an elbow or a shoulder; and soon she reached a vantage-point, right up beside the fighting, close to the edge of the pier. She saw with satisfaction the

flail of arms, the quick vicious thrusts, the dramatic clash of bodies, and then a movement at her side caught her eye, and she found a new and more absorbing interest.

She was standing close to the notorious Red Dirk Stullen.

It was unmistakably Captain Stullen, and he was near enough to touch. He was taking his ease against a bollard, one hand grasping a boat-hook, the other thrust negligently into his trouser pocket. She gaped at him unreservedly, her eyes sucking in the portrait of a big man in a long reefer jacket and white seamen's pants, a man with his cap tilted on to the back of his head to reveal a ridge of rust-red hair, a man with a dark, sea-faring face in which the features, seen in profile, had the bold and rigid angles of features hacked from stone.

She took a half-step nearer and leaned forward from the waist to stare better, her head cocked on her shoulder like a bird's. She was vaguely disappointed in Captain Stullen. Why, she had seen a hundred sea captains more colourful than this one—men with brocaded coats, with medals that clanked, with ear-rings of opal and moonstone and cat's eye, with pigtails long as your arm, with ornamented gold bracelets and hands loaded with jewellery.

She looked at Captain Stullen's hand on the boat-hook. It was plain and blunt and hairy. Her eyes swept up and fastened like burs on his face. In her new bent-pin posture she had an excellent three-quarter view, and she granted him some quality in his face. The moustache was silly. It was not a real moustache like the doctor's or the cobbler's, for it had neither luxuriance nor twirl. It was merely a line, and it extended only the length of the upper lip. She examined the rest of the face point by point, noting the hard lines of the jaw, the jutting lower lip, the Indian nose, the cool, almost colourless eyes. . . .

As she stared, these eyes, drawn by her own, slewed round deliberately and struck her with a full glance. She stepped back, straightened up, threw her head anywhere in a gesture of extreme embarrassment; and just at that moment a sudden eddy in the fight sent a ripple of movement through the crowd, a shoulder poked her abruptly in the chest, and she toppled backwards over the edge of the quay, feeling her legs go up, up, up, and altogether too astonished to cry out. It was not until she hit the sea that she realised

what had happened. She made the first motions of a scream then, and immediately sank.

She came to the surface pop-eyed, spluttering, frantic. She saw a long stretch of faces above, their expression only mildly curious. She opened her mouth for a loud skirl and immediately plummeted like a stone. When she came up again her eyes were glazed, and there were big drums beating in her ears. "I'm drowning," she thought bitterly. "And nobody cares."

She lashed out convulsively with her arms, and was surprised to find herself buoyed up as if some invisible hand had seized her by the waistband. She continued to flail with her arms, and, noting that she was being impelled towards the harbour wall, fancied for a moment that she was swimming; but as the pressure on her waist increased and she felt herself lifted almost clear of the water, she realised that this could not be so. She became aware of faces above, of voices:

"The ladder! The ladder!"

She saw an iron rung in the wall and grabbed hold of it. She would have been more than content to rest there for a minute, but the inexorable pull on her midriff continued, and she had no choice but to move her hands up the rungs as she was lifted slowly from above, her body looped and her legs dangling, like a heifer on a sling. Her senses were clearing now, and she perceived that she was being elevated on the end of a boat-hook, deftly enmeshed in her skirts, and that the other end of the boat-hook was being manipulated by Captain Stullen.

She took a firm grip of the nearest rung, holding on grimly, although the lower half of her body continued to rise. She wished to inform Captain Stullen and all the rest of that grinning multitude that she could manage nicely by herself, but by the time she had arranged this thought into words she was all but upside down, and in this position could not screw her head round to address those above, and, indeed, could not speak. When she tried to do so a jet of salt water shot like a projectile from her mouth.

She retched, and was ignominiously sick.

She felt better then. Her skirts had fallen like a tent over her head, and she let go the rung and breast-stroked the folds of the cloth away from her face. She was so well now that she thought

only of the ignominy of her position—dripping wet and sick, hauled out of the sea on a boat-hook, upside down, and with her black cotton drawers showing. She forgot that she had ever been in any danger, and, scarlet with humiliation, flung back her head to re-establish equilibrium, and kicked out at space in a way which, even as she did so, she knew to be particularly feminine and futile. She heard folks laughing close above and dared not raise her face to look at them.

"What am I bid?" someone shouted, mocking the fish salesman. "What price the conger?"

She could have wept with rage.

She heard a mock cheer, felt herself lifted like a kitten by the scruff of the neck and deposited on the quay. She saw Red Dirk Stullen through a haze of anger as he bent forward and fumbled with her dress, intent on disengaging his boat-hook. From somewhere in the encircling crowd she heard her name spoken. "Thirza Gare." In imagination she heard it everywhere. They were all speaking about her, mocking her, laughing at her. Her eyes focused with difficulty on the big man's smiling face. . . .

She swung her arm with all her force, and the heel of her hand caught Red Dirk Stullen on the ear with the hollow plop of an exploding paper bag.

He picked her up, his fingers biting into the flesh of her shoulders, and held her high so that her face was on a level with his own.

"Don't you kiss me!" she screamed.

He laughed aloud at that and shook his head in mock reproof. She was looking straight into his eyes, and she saw that they were full of genuine amusement. A redness swam in front of her own eyes, and, in a fury, she fought an arm loose, and drove her clenched fist on to his mouth. She had time only to notice that his grin had broadened before he swung her around, scooped her up in one hand as casually as though she had been an unwanted fish, and tossed her back into the sea.

Her clothes were now sodden and without buoyancy, and the weighted hem of her dress dragged her down like a sinker. She might really have drowned if Willie Watty, one of the apprentice coopers at the yard, had not rushed down the ladder rungs and caught her by the hair. She was quite exhausted. She allowed Willie

Watty to lift her on to his shoulder, bear her to the pier, and carry her, like a sack of potatoes, through the crowd to the Shore. There she recovered sufficiently to demand to be put down, but Willie said, "Na, na, I've cairried ye sae far I micht jist as weel cairry ye hame," and she hadn't the strength to argue.

To her everlasting chagrin she began to bawl like a baby.

CHAPTER VIII

(1)

FOR A WEEK THIRZA LIVED a nightmare existence. She was convinced that everyone was watching her, discussing her, deriding her, that the picture of Thirza Gare, impaled on the end of a boat-hook, was as indelibly fixed in everyone else's mind as it was in her own. She held her head high as she stalked to and from work, outstaring all who stared, curt with her greetings, painfully conscious of the gossips at their doors. At the yard she gutted viciously, her eyes glued to her work, her ears cocked to catch a mention of her name. And all the time she carried in her mind that hateful portrait, clear as a daguerreotype, of a drowned rat of a girl, her skirts over her head and her drawers showing, being jerked out of the harbour on a boat-hook.

It was while Thirza was in this unhappy state of mind that the notice appeared in the office window. She said afterwards that the moment she saw that notice she had a strange and powerful feeling that it was meant for her alone; and, when she had read it, the feeling became a conviction. She was sure that she had been singled out by Fate for just this opportunity, that the whole course of her life had been divinely shaped to bring her at this particular time to this particular spot outside Skene's office window. She read the momentous words with intense excitement.

WANTED AT ONCE. TEMPORARY CLERK.

If she only could get that job!

Imagine, to be a clerk, to work with your brain, and always to have clean hands! She watched the notice all day, planning, day-dreaming, arranging the method and style of her application, conducting long conversations with Mr. Skene. . . .

She knew what the objection would be. They would shake their heads. They would say, "But you're a girl."

"Well," she would reply, "why shouldn't a girl—an exceptional girl like me—why shouldn't she be a clerk?" And while they were still searching for an answer she would throw down her challenge. "Tell me. Just tell me," she would say, "what any of your young men can do that I can't do just as well." She would let a small silence gather while they thought. . . . "Handwriting?" she would say, and she would lift a quill from Mr. Skene's desk and write in her bold clear hand: "Skene's is the oldest-established and most influential business in the north of Scotland." That would please him. "Now candidly, Mr. Skene," she would say, "can any of your young men write a better hand than that?"

Mr. Skene would have to say no. "That is certainly fine writing," he would say.

"With regard to figures," she would say calmly, "I'm as fast and accurate as anyone, and as for Latin, well," she would say, "well, I don't want to boast, Mr. Skene, but the Dominie says I'm quite up to University standard. . . ."

She spent the whole day turning the job over in her mind, considering her suitability from every angle, now confident, now miserably uncertain. Twice, during the late afternoon, she wiped her hands clean and marched towards the office, fully intending to go in and offer her services to Mr. Skene, but at the last moment her courage failed her, and, with an uncomfortable flutter in her stomach, she walked on to the cooper's shop, passing the office door without even a sidelong glance.

As usual, she was one of the last in the yard. Before she went home she strolled up to the office window, walking very idly in case anyone was watching, and again studied the notice:

WANTED AT ONCE. TEMPORARY CLERK.

She was implacably resolved to have that job. She would apply first thing to-morrow. She would wash her hair to-night and do it up in a chignon. She would dress with especial care and wear her pinchbeck lava brooch. . . .

She saw the old man, the head clerk, Mr. Mortimer, cross the room towards the door, and she hurriedly moved away. She told herself that if the notice was still in the window next morning she would regard it as an omen. It would mean that the situation was

not yet filled, and she would take it to mean, in addition, that Providence had meant this job for her. Her courage would not fail again. If the job was still advertised next morning she would—yes, she certainly would go in and ask for it. She raised her eyes slowly to the darkening sky. She was sweating.

"I swear it," she said.

She slept very badly that night.

The notice was still in the window when she arrived at work next morning, but it was not till she had been waiting for over an hour that Mr. Skene, with brisk little flourishes of his gold-knobbed cane, entered the yard. She was in a fever of impatience, but she forced herself to wait a little longer in order to give Mr. Skene time to take off his coat, and while she was waiting, wiping her already clean hands on her hips and chewing nervously on her lower lip, a young man, a stranger, sauntered into the yard and, to her great consternation, enquired the way to the office.

Thirza waited with a stone of dread in her stomach. The young man was in the office for at least ten minutes, and when he came out he paused on the doorstep and looked round the yard as if he owned it. Thirza studied him surreptitiously. She was sure he had got the job. He was just the type. Smart as a ferret. Superior-looking too. The sort of young man, she reflected bitterly, who was born to be a clerk.

She had very little hope now. She decided to count up to five hundred to give them time to take the notice out of the window, but her patience ran out in the four hundreds, and, still counting, she knocked on the outer door and walked into the main office.

The clerks were arranging their papers, opening letters, adjusting ink-stands and quills. They had not yet started on the day's work, and they were in no hurry to begin. As Thirza came in they raised curious and expectant faces, but did not speak. It was not their place to speak. It was the privilege of the Head Clerk, Mr. Mortimer, to address all visitors, and Mr. Mortimer, just then, had his back to the door. Mr. Mortimer was talking with great severity to the office boy.

"No, George," Mr. Mortimer was saying. "No, no, no. There is only one way in which to inscribe the letter 'R'. I have demonstrated this to you before, and I do not propose to demonstrate it

again. At Skene's we have a certain reputation for what we call, ahem yes, our business methods, which I would not expect you to understand, but what you *can* understand, no doubt—at least, I hope there is no doubt that you can understand it—is that while you are here, and if you wish to remain here, you will carry out your instructions to the letter—the letter, George—ahem—even the letter R—and, if you do not do so, I make so bold as to say that you will rue it."

The nearest clerk, who had been waiting for the opportunity, here inserted the throat-clearing noise with which the Head Clerk was accustomed to have his attention drawn. Mr. Mortimer turned sharply, the dark, parchment-like flesh of his neck breaking in folds over his high collar. He cast an eye, a contemptuous eye, on the intruder.

"Your business?" he said shortly.

"I was wondering," Thirza said, and stopped uncertainly. A fine fool she would look applying for a job which was already filled! "It's the notice," she said. "You've forgot to take it down."

"Notice?" Mr. Mortimer said, bewildered by this unexpected criticism. "Notice . . . ah what? What are you talking about? What notice?"

"The notice in the window," Thirza said, articulating very clearly. "You've forgotten to take it down."

"What notice?"

"About the clerk."

The clerks beamed to each other.

"You appear, ahem," Mr. Mortimer said, still startled, but getting into his accustomed stride, "to be labouring under a misapprehension. I have forgotten nothing. There is a notice in the window which states that a clerk is wanted. I have not removed the notice for the simple reason—the reason that appears, at least, simple to me—that a clerk is still wanted. Do I make myself clear?"

Thirza smiled, impervious to the old man's sarcasm and to the young men's smirks. So the smart stranger hadn't been hired! So the situation was still vacant! . . . "Well, then, I want to apply for it," she said in a rush.

"I beg your pardon."

"I want to apply for the situation," she said.

"What situation?"

"Clerk. Temporary clerk."

This was too much. The clerks tittered, and then guffawed; even the office-boy smiled; Mr. Mortimer dabbed at his brow with the palms of both hands. "Dear me," he said. "Dear me, I don't know what things are coming to, really I don't. Gentlemen, you might please to desist from these unseemly noises and occupy yourselves with your tasks. George, readdress that envelope. But first take the *Queenie Ann* papers ben to Mr. Skene. They are the papers in the right-hand corner of my desk, and they are bound with pink tape. Now, young woman, if you'll kindly return to your duties. . . ."

"But I want to apply for the job," Thirza said.

There was an outbreak of rustling and shuffling from the desks.

"I want to be a clerk," Thirza said. "I can read and write, and I have a knowledge of mathematics."

"Clerking," Mr. Mortimer said in his severest tones, "is not a joke, madam. It is a highly responsible occupation, an occupation for men—in fact, I might say, for men of quality and character. I am obliged to you for your application. Now good day, madam."

"Mr. Mortimer, sir," the office boy said. "The papers are nae on your desk, nae the *Queenie Ann's,* sir."

"It never occurred to me that they were," Mr. Mortimer said. "If you would listen, George, if you would be so kind as to honour me sometimes with your attention, you would save yourself and me a great deal of trouble. I said *in* my desk."

"In here?" George said, lifting the roll-top.

"In there," Mr. Mortimer said grimly.

Thirza stood her ground. "I don't see why a girl shouldn't be a clerk if she's clever enough," she said.

Mr. Mortimer elevated his eyebrows in a massive gesture of suffering.

"Why shouldn't a young woman be a clerk, Mr. Mortimer?"

"I don't know why a young woman shouldn't be a clerk," Mr. Mortimer said. "That is, I *do* know, but I am not prepared to discuss it. Young women are not employed as clerks, madam. Let that suffice. And one obvious reason why young women are not suitable for employment as clerks—to mention only one of a host of good reasons—as I was saying, one very good reason is that they

are not able to read and they are not able to write, and in an old-fashioned business like Skene's we like our clerks, indeed we very much prefer our clerks, to be able to read and write. Young women, in a word, are not sufficiently educated, madam. . . . Not these papers, George, you addle-headed gomeril. The ones in the corner."

"I am," Thirza said.

"You are what?"

"Educated," Thirza said. "Quite sufficiently educated. Indeed I am, Mr. Mortimer."

Mr. Mortimer raised his wizened palms in despair. "Please," he said. "If you please. I have told you. . . . No one appears ever to pay any attention to what I say nowadays. Upon my soul, I don't know what things are coming to. Educated indeed." He could not resist the barb. "I suppose you went to a Dame's School?"

"Yes."

"My good young woman . . . I really mean to say . . . and for how long, must I ask, for what period of years did you have the inestimable benefit of this so-called education?"

"I attended school for one year," Thirza said. "But——"

"In that case, you must of course be admirably educated. Nevertheless—nevertheless, madam, despite your educational qualifications, I am forced to reject your application. Now—and for the last time, young woman—good *day*!"

"But," Thirza persisted, "I can read and write Latin."

The clerks were clearing their throats, shuffling their feet in paroxysms of delight; the office boy was searching noisily for the *Queenie Ann* papers, and from the yard a babel had arisen as the cart bearing the first herrings of the day was backed up to the farlin. Thirza could not be sure that Mr. Mortimer had heard, and she said, shouting, "I can talk Latin too."

The door of Mr. Skene's office opened just then, and Mr. Skene's head and shoulders appeared in the doorway. "Mortimer," he said. "Those papers."

"Coming," Mr. Mortimer said. "They're just coming through to you, sir."

"Mr. Skene, sir," Thirza said. "About my application, if you please, sir. . . ."

Mr. Skene blinked at her.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Aren't you the girl who had trouble with dunting?"

"Her name is Thirza Gare, sir," Mortimer said, and he looked blankly at the wall above Mr. Skene's head, content to let the fact speak for itself. "She had a year's education at a Dame's School, and she wants to be a clerk."

"Hah," Mr. Skene said absently. "Well, these papers."

"George!" Mr. Mortimer said.

"Mr. Mortimer, sir," George said. "They're nae here in the right-hand corner of your desk, no really, they're jist nae here, Mr. Mortimer."

"Oh dear!" Mr. Mortimer said. "Dear me, have I got to do everything?" and he crossed the room at a shuffling run, rummaged and burrowed like an elderly rabbit, and emerged with the papers in his hand. He returned, shaking his head, mumbling disapprovingly into his cravat. "The *Queenie Ann* papers, sir." He handed them over with a ceremonial flourish which would have done credit to a royal envoy. "I think you'll find these all in order, Mr. Skene."

"And the Baltic affair?" Mr. Skene enquired. "Zimmerman's?"

"Mr. Donald is making his fair copy now, sir. How are you progressing, Donald?"

"Slowly," Donald said; "I've just commenced, Mr. Mortimer."

"Just commenced! But surely I gave it to you, let me see. . . ."

"You gave it to me this morning, Mr. Mortimer. Less than half an hour ago."

"Oh yes. Dear me. You may remember, Mr. Skene, we had the five agreements in triplicate yesterday afternoon. I was working personally till the early hours of this morning. I don't know . . . we don't seem to be getting anything done. . . . Dear me, are you waiting for the Zimmerman document, sir?"

"I am," Mr. Skene said.

"I worked very late," Mr. Mortimer said. "I burned the midnight oil, Mr. Skene, but all to no avail, it appears. If I had realised that the Zimmerman papers were urgent—what a pity—but no, I worked on the ledger. Would it signify—do you think it would signify if for once we had two hands on the deed of contract?"

"It would not signify at all," Mr. Skene said. "As long as we get

this Zimmerman affair settled to-day. By all means put someone else on the job!"

"Mair!"

"Mr. Mortimer, sir?"

"Be good enough to assist Donald with his fair copy." Mr. Mortimer straightened his back and patted his palms together in a great executive fluster. "Hasten, man. Pray expedite yourself. This is a matter of some urgency, indeed yes, urgency." He made after Mr. Skene, who was in the act of disappearing once more into his private office. "It is unfortunate, most unpropitious, sir, that it should be now, just when we are short-handed, that we have such a press of business. If I could only get, if I had another clerk, Mr. Skene, I think, yes, if I had another clerk. . . ."

"Pah!" Mr. Skene said impatiently. "I told you a month ago, I warned you this would happen. . . ." But he was not really concerned. He looked at Thirza and smiled. "If you're so short-handed," he said, and he nodded in Thirza's direction, "why not employ the girl?" And with this Parthian shot he closed his door.

Mr. Mortimer glared at Thirza.

The door of Mr. Skene's room opened again. "About the *Queenie,* Mortimer. . . ."

"Sir . . . sir, I cannot help; I must, I feel I must enquire, indeed protest. . . ."

"Well, what is it, man? What are you stuttering about?"

"Were you serious, sir? When you said—about—ah—about employing this girl?"

"No," said Mr. Skene. He glanced at Thirza, hesitated, cleared his throat and said sharply, "As I was saying—about the *Queenie,* Mortimer . . ."

"I can talk Latin," Thirza interjected.

"Indeed," Mr. Skene said. "A most useful accomplishment, although not in a curing office. Did you say you could *talk* Latin?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well well, astonishing." He gave her a long penetrating stare, and turned away. "Mortimer, the *Queenie's* skipper . . . just a minute. . . ." He turned again to Thirza, his eyes shrewd and amused. "And how do you come to be able to talk Latin, young woman?"

"Talk Latin indeed!" Mortimer said.

"Be quiet, Mortimer."

"Well," Thirza said. "It seemed the easiest way, to talk it. I mean, after I had learned the rudiments. We sometimes have whole days, the Dominie and I, when we carry on all our conversations in Latin."

"Good gracious!" Mr. Skene said. "And how old are you?"

"Sixteen," she said. "And I can write beautifully." She saw that she had caught Mr. Skene's interest and she pressed her advantage home. "And I've done the whole of Pythagoras," she said quickly. "And I've read hundreds, maybe thousands, of books."

"Bless my soul!" Mr. Skene said. "A prodigy."

"I'm sure I would make a good clerk, Mr. Skene. And I know a lot about the business too. I understand the whole process of barrel-making; I've often helped the coopers when the gutting was finished, and I know about the fishing side with my father being a fisherman, and I know all about the Brand and the branding marks —and the things I don't know I would soon learn, Mr. Skene. I would work day and night if you would give me a chance." She looked at him in passionate appeal. "You'd never regret it, Mr. Skene."

"We can't employ young women in the office," Mr. Skene began, and then he looked straight into Thirza's eyes, and could not go on. He was a kind-hearted man, maybe too kind-hearted. His kindness was always being taken advantage of, and he knew that, yet made no attempt to curb it. He was surprised to see pain, real pain, in the child's eyes. He shook his head. "We can't have young women. . . ." And then, fearing quite wrongly that she was about to burst into tears, he checked himself abruptly, dropped his glance to the document in his hands, and turned it end for end. "Well, why not?" he said after a brief pause. "Why not, Mortimer? All right, take her on. And now, about the *Queenie* affair, come into the office. . . . What's the matter with you, man? Don't stand there spluttering. You're short-handed, aren't you? Well, employ the girl temporarily until you can get a proper clerk. It can't do any harm."

"But she's a fisher-girl, Mr. Skene."

"I don't care if she's a tailless baboon," Mr. Skene said. "Pro-

vided she can write. If she can write, employ her. Now with reference to John McNab's letter about Zimmerman's. . . ." Still talking, Mr. Skene disappeared into the inner office, and Mortimer, clucking his disapproval, followed reluctantly.

When the door closed the clerks raised their faces and looked at each other in unholy glee.

"Mistress Gare," Mr. Donald said, winking to the other two. "On behalf of my brother scribes, permit me to welcome you into our forum. Now, no doubt you would like some instruction on your duties, for I cannot help thinking that if you are to work day and night you will not wish to lose a minute of time. Your desk." And he flourished an arm in the direction of the large roll-top desk at the rear of the room. "Allow me."

"I can mount a stool, thank you, sir," Thirza said coldly, "without your assistance." And she did so.

"Now," Mr. Donald said, striking a pose, "this is a quill. Observe this well, madam, for you will see more of it. It is customary to hold the quill in the hand, thus—the right hand, if you please—and thereafter to dip the pointed end in the inkwell, thus —then by manipulation of hand and aforesaid quill to produce characters upon paper. If you have any difficulty in forming characters, why, madam, all you need do is consult George, for George is noted for his characters, not least his 'R's'. I think it would be proper for you to call him Master George. You will find him most helpful, though smudgy-handed and not overclean in his habits. Now for some practical instruction. We shall start with the A B C." He stabbed the quill between Thirza's fingers and, leaning over her from behind, grasped her wrist.

"Please to take your hands off me!" Thirza snapped.

"Come come, Mistress Gare—ouch!"

Mr. Donald straightened up with a jerk, rubbing the crutch of his hand between thumb and forefinger where the quill point had venomously pricked him. "See what you've done. You've bled me," he said aggrievedly.

"I beg your pardon," Thirza said sweetly.

There was a warning cough. Somebody whispered, "Watch out, Bill!" And Mr. Donald slid across the room to his own desk.

The door of the inner office opened, and Mr. Mortimer, puffing

and blowing with temper, chugged, like an overheated steam-engine, into the room.

Thirza sat upright, the quill still in her hand, watching Mr. Mortimer expectantly. She was entirely pleased with her disposal of the insufferable Mr. Donald, and she felt sure that in time she would find a way to appease even Mr. Mortimer. She gave him her nicest smile.

Mr. Mortimer stood spluttering. There was no sound at all in the room save for Mr. Mortimer's increasingly steam-like splutters and the laboured scratching of quills. "Girl!" Mr. Mortimer said, belching out the word at last. "Bless my soul! Upon my faith!" And he spoke with such venom that he made these mild exclamations sound like oaths. "What do you mean by it? What *do* you mean? Lay down my quill! Get off my stool! Get away from *my desk*!"

(2)

At this time, and in this conservative district, a female clerk was quite unheard of, and there was much talk—most of it unkind—when it was learned that William Skene had employed young Thirza Gare as a clerk.

Talk snowballed round Thirza Gare, clerk. Mr. Skene was discreetly sounded out on the subject of girls in offices at the Town and County Club; Mr. Mortimer was waylaid in the street and asked his opinion of the innovation; and the clerks were ragged unmercifully.

It was undoubtedly the clerks who suffered most from Thirza's incursion into office life; their status was threatened, their self-respect challenged; and it was from the clerks that Thirza, in turn, suffered most.

She soon found that she could deal with Mr. Mortimer. Mr. Mortimer had a tongue of acid and a divine belief in the House of Skene, but he was an honest man, and a man who respected work, especially work for Skene's, and he had to admit, albeit grudgingly, that Thirza Gare could handle a quill like a man—ay, and better than most men he had trained in his forty-seven years with Skene's.

Skene's clerks did not know what to make of Thirza. They all knew that she was a fisher-girl, but they very soon realised that she

was no ordinary fisher-girl and could not be treated as fisher-girls ordinarily were. When they tried to make a butt of her they often found themselves the butts instead, and when they tried to put her in her place by a show of knowledge they were disconcerted to find that she had a habit of knowing a little bit more than they knew themselves. And when, finally, determined to assert their superiority, they resorted to violences, such as inking her neck and jerking her stool away by lanyards as she was about to sit on it, they were left always with the uncomfortable feeling that they had acted as less than gentlemen.

Thirza created no scenes, told no tales. She resisted when attacked, but only to the extent which she considered decorous in a female. She did not bite or scratch, and only once did she lose her temper, and that was during a general rough and tumble, when she suspected that Mr. Donald, her most persistent tormentor, was taking an undue liberty with her person. Even then, though she felt she would be amply justified in creating a scene, she resisted the temptation to be feminine or dramatic. She merely gave Mr. Donald a very sharp and surreptitious kick on the knee-cap; and this served to check Mr. Donald at least as effectively as though she had screamed, and was really much more satisfying in the long run; for it resulted in Mr. Donald limping for a week.

Thirza disliked Mr. Donald exceedingly.

Mr. Donald was quite old—twenty-eight, to be precise—and Mr. Donald was dangerously clever. He was tall, slim, with wavy blue-black hair and small regular features. Maidens fluttered their lashes at him, and married ladies had their husbands invite him to the house for a hand of whist. Mr. Donald had the wit to be discreet. He never boasted of his conquests, and it became common knowledge among the less respectable ladies of the town that Mr. Donald served his friends well, and that one's honour, so to speak, was safe with him. He became increasingly popular.

The other two clerks, Mr. Adam and Mr. Mair, were not of Mr. Donald's calibre.

Mr. Adam was a short, energetic young man with a small head that sat, tortoise-fashion, on bulky shoulders, and a wide slab mouth which never quite closed over his teeth. He had an extraordinary laugh, like something in opera, and it was Mr. Donald's practice

and delight to do all he could to provoke this laugh, while Mr. Mair, with one yellow eye on Mr. Skene's door, did all he could to shush it.

Mr. Mair was a cooper's son, a gangling, pimply-faced youth who suffered from asthma, and who owed his position in the office to Mr. Skene's kindness of heart rather than to any clerical talent. He was painstaking, but extremely slow. He wrote left-handed, gripping his quill between his first and second fingers, and when he stroked a "t" or dotted an "i," he did so with the deliberation of a painter putting the finishing touches on a great work of art.

When Thirza first went to work in the office she had noticed that there was a certain coolness between Mr. Mair and Mr. Donald, and she had tried hard to win Mr. Mair as an ally. It was no good. Mr. Mair undoubtedly disliked Mr. Donald, but he was too much of a weakling to dare to show it. As for the other two—Mr. Adam and George—she soon realised that they were so completely in Mr. Donald's pocket that she could expect no help of any kind from them, and so she girded herself for a lone struggle, watching Mr. Donald warily, noting his winks and innuendoes, treating his frontal attacks with contempt, and parrying his subtler thrusts with thrusts of her own. When Mr. Donald, trying to penetrate her defences by infiltration, made courteous advances, she received them with frigid politeness. She accepted his compliments without comment; she rejected his invitation to accompany him on an evening stroll; and she laughed aloud at him when he produced what he had told the boys was an ace by asking her to partner him to a soirée in the Auld Kirk Hall. She had none of the usual weaknesses of a girl of her age. She had no curiosity about men, and as yet no sex inclinations. She genuinely found men distasteful: she had not forgotten Ezekiel Fleming.

And so she sat, prim and impregnable on her high stool, interested only in her work, and altogether impervious to the attractions which Mr. Donald had every reason to know that he possessed. For this reason he found her increasingly desirable.

CHAPTER IX

(1)

THIRZA'S NEW WORK FASCINATED HER. She was never bored. She could not understand the weariness which descended on the other clerks in the middle of a sunny afternoon. Could it be that they did not appreciate what a great adventure it was to clerk at Skene's? For her part, she saw romance in every aspect of the curing business. The rows of figures, the dusty legal documents, were only symbols, and if you looked at them closely you saw that really they were records—dramatic and exciting records of the lives of men.

When Mr. Mortimer looked at "George Wood (Bo) his mark" he probably saw only the rude scratch of a hand unaccustomed to hold a pen, but Thirza, looking at that same mark, saw not only Geordie Wood, his red brow glistening with sweat as he lowered his face right down to the sheet of paper and stabbed it self-consciously with the quill, she saw also, in terms of men and women, the circumstances which had led up to Geordie's signature and the great chain of consequences that stretched out from that simple act.

She saw Geordie Wood's home. . . .

All the members of the crew were there, her own father among them. They were sitting on the nets which Geordie's wife, Jean, had laid out ready for them, and they were having a serious discussion. They were debating which curer they should sign up with. There was not much talk, for they were not talking men, and when one of them gave an opinion the others considered it for what might have seemed to outsiders to be an unnecessarily long time. Each comment was grave and weighty; each man had his say.

"Skene's an honest man," her father said.

"Ay, Geordie," they said finally. "Sign wi' Skene."

The scene shifted.

They stood in Skene's office, all seven of them. They were good-humoured but sheepish, conscious of their cracked boots and their

big hands. Most of them were secretly afraid, although they did not know what they were afraid of. They laughed with unusual ease at Mr. Skene's little jokes.

"Well, Geordie," Mr. Skene said. "You'd better get it over quick. It shouldn't hurt overmuch. Just make your mark here."

Geordie made his mark then, while the crew clustered round and, breathing hard, watched over his shoulder.

Mr. Skene brought out his whisky, and they each drank a glass straight off, saying, "Good health, sir," careful not to mention any of the unlucky words, such as, for instance, "luck"; and then each man shook hands gravely with Mr. Skene, and went home to tell his family it was all settled, they were Skene's for the season.

And afterwards. . . .

It was the first evening of the new season and the whole Fishertown was down at the harbour. The boats were far out in the Bay now, twilight was falling, and the brown sails on the horizon looked no bigger than moths' wings.

Early morning at last. Everybody astir and in a good humour, because it was the first morning of the fishing, and because, mercifully, it had been a calm night. The wives and mothers at their doors, chaffing each other in their strident voices, the bairns silly with excitement, and one baby, stark naked, running down the Slope. . . .

"D'ye see them, Mither?"

"I see them, Thirzy."

They were visible as boats now. You could see the hulls, and soon you could pick out the shapes of men. You could recognise the boats, and if you had good eyes you could even recognise the men in the boats.

She saw the "Rose Finlay." She identified her father.

The boats were coming in a long straggling procession through the bottle-neck of the harbour entrance. There was very little wind, and the oars were out.

William Skene's runner was at the end of the pier, his hands up in a trumpet at his mouth.

"Fit'n like, Geordie?"

"Fower cran."

The Mate argued. The Mate always argued. Geordie only smiled,

and the Mate swung round and held up his hand, fingers outstretched. "Five," he called to the runner. "Five, mair like."

The runner wrote in his book with his ear pencil. Geordie put the heel of his hand on the tiller and extended his arm full length, and the "Rose Finlay" slewed round the elbow of the West Wall, into the harbour.

She waved to her father, and her father, reluctant to make any show of emotion, nodded briefly. The forr'd hands lifted their oars inboard, and one of them picked up the rope.

"Hey, Jeems," Geordie shouted to the runner. "Hey, fit like's the rest?"

"Middlin'," the runner said, looking out for the next Skene boat. "Middlin' poor. 'Alice' has twalve. Faraboots did ye haul?"

"East," Geordie said. "East." And he threw his left arm out in an expansive gesture. "Ootbye."

"Did you see 'Anne McKay'?"

"'Anne McKay,'" Geordie said. "Ony o' ye see 'Anne McKay,' lads?"

But none of them had seen her.

There was work to be done now—good, satisfying work, in which women and children could help. The unloading. The landing of the herring.

Thirza saw and heard and smelled it.

The scaly hands and wrists. The skirl and stishy of the gulls. The slither-slap of dead fish on cobbles. The wifies wi' their creels. The procession of horses and carts to the curers'. The yards a-clatter and a-bustle. The clop of horses' hooves. "Whoa, man!" The droosh and the thud as load after load of herrings was tilted into the farlin. The harsh, deep voices of the coopers and the female clackety-clake, strident as spades on stone. The swish of herring-stained skirts and the crackle of oilskin aprons. Shouting, and a trundling of barrels. All hands at work, fingers twinkling, tongues awag, salt rising like spray. More horses, more carts. Another ton of herrings in the farlin. The monotonous music of the saw, and the drum of hammers on hollow wood. Wild laughter from mad Liz, and a clerk knocking on the office window. Another barrel ready, and another. "Faur's yon cooper chiel? Hey, Jeems! . . ." And then the cooper with his chisel and his jokes. And the sun

slipping to the west and a monument of filled barrels rising in the shed.

Later, there was the dunting and the flagging and the bunging. Later still, the branding.

She smiled, seeing the scene in all its detail. . . .

There was Mr. McNeil, the Fishery Officer, substantial as the Kirk, with a great bight of gold chain dangling from his waistcoat pocket. He was a stiff man, stiff-backed, stiff-spoken for all he had a soft voice—a Highlander, they said—a man from the Isles. He had a massive head and a big paunch, short legs, and small feet, and as he picked his way carefully through the rubble of the yard, walking with the dignity proper to his office, you could not help thinking that he looked like a fastidious big Angus bull.

Mr. Skene came out of his office, smiling, and shook hands with the dour-faced Mr. McNeil, and they walked together to the shed where the cure awaited the brand. They made a notable contrast. Although their trouser-seats were on a level, Mr. McNeil towered above Mr. Skene. Mr. Skene did not look like a bull or any other kind of livestock. He looked like the very pleasant human being he was. As he passed his work-people in the yard, he kept nodding and smiling; and when he spoke to one of the gutters he addressed her by her Christian name. . . .

Mr. McNeil pointed out certain of the barrels, and the foreman cooper advanced with fid and mallet to open them. As the heads of the barrels came off everyone watched. Mr. McNeil always took a long time to inspect the barrels. There was no point too minute to escape his attention, no flaw too minor to be overlooked, but at last everything was said that could be said, the cure was passed for brand, the barrels were closed, the Government brand was applied.

Mr. Skene placed his hand for a moment on Mr. McNeil's shoulder. Mr. McNeil almost smiled, for he was partial to a drop, and they walked back together to the office. George, the office boy, opened the door, and for a moment Mr. Mortimer appeared in the doorway, hands ceremoniously on his coat lapels, bowing the gentlemen in. . . .

That was the herring industry as the folks of the Fishertown knew it. There, at the half-way mark, their knowledge of it came to a full-stop. From there on, it was nobody's business but the

curers', and nobody but the curers and the curers' clerks had any idea what a very fascinating business it was. Catching fish might be difficult, curing fish might be tedious, but selling fish—ah—selling fish was a great and glorious adventure, part art, part gamble, in which fortunes were annually made and lost—in which the curer, staking large sums against acts of God and fishes, stood, in a good year, to make huge profits; and, in a bad year, to lose his shirt.

Thirza plunged with characteristic zeal into every aspect of this new and fascinating side of the herring business. She read every office record that she could lay hands on. She memorised whole sheets of figures, and as she lay in bed at nights, having just returned from thirteen and sometimes fourteen hours of work at the office, she would take these sheets out of her teeming memory and examine them again in terms of the men who had made them. She would stare through the figures until they faded away, and then, in their place, she would see on the dark walls of her closet exciting panoramic pictures of the trade.

She saw ships, realistic to the last detail of their rigging—sturdy little schooners, their reef points drumming, their catheads clouded with spindrift as they ploughed through the German Ocean, bound for the Baltic with consignments of Skene's Crown-branded fulls. She saw men more clearly than she had ever seen men with her physical eye, strange foreign men—Germans, Poles, Russians, Irishmen, dressed from imagination and therefore very picturesque—men who spoke languages which she had never heard with her physical ear, but which she heard now and even, miraculously, understood. She saw these men against strange and detailed backgrounds. She saw them in foreign harbours, in their offices, their warehouses, their ships' cabins; and as they did business together, arguing liens and demurrage, freights and duties, the number of crans and the price—eternally the price—she listened avidly to their talk of rix-dollars and gulders and rubles and groselen, and noted all their manœuvres and stratagems, seeing not only shades of expression in their faces, but even such shades of intention as flickered across their minds.

In the midst of so much turmoil it was hard to relax, but at last her eyelids would slide down over her hot eyes and she would drift into an exhausted sleep. She often woke unrested, but as she sipped

her breakfast ale and listened with half an ear to Manson's small talk, some aspect of the trade would rekindle her imagination, her eyes would become bright and secret, and, thinking excitedly of the day's work ahead, she would quite forget that she was tired.

She walked to the yard each morning with long, purposeful strides. . . .

Who knew what adventures the day might bring? There might be despatches from Stettin or Könisberg, a letter from the owner of the Aberdeen brig *Marianna* which Mr. Skene wished to charter, news of the price the commission agent had obtained for the last consignment to Ireland, an inspection by the Fishery Officer, visits from clients or customers. . . .

Each day had its odd incidents, its unpredictable events; and even if this turned out to be one of those quiet days on which nothing much happened, there would still at least be new facts and new figures to digest, a smile from Mr. Skene, and the usual brush with Mr. Donald.

It was a very satisfying life.

CHAPTER X

(1)

ONE TUESDAY MORNING, IN THIRZA'S third month in Skene's office, Mr. Donald came in several minutes late, slung his coat and cap on his peg, crossed the room to his desk without a word or a glance for anyone, and applied himself with exceptional vigour to the papers on his desk. Although he kept his head down he was unable entirely to conceal his face, and it was evident to everyone, observing it inquisitively, that Mr. Donald's face had undergone a painful experience. Mr. Donald's left eye was discoloured and almost completely closed, his mouth was puffed up like a prize-fighter's, and his right cheek was disfigured by a weal which extended all the way from his hairline to the point of his jaw.

Thirza looked with lively anticipation at Mr. Mortimer. She expected that Mr. Mortimer would have some interesting comment to make, but Mr. Mortimer, to her great disappointment, merely studied Mr. Donald from under his brows, pursed his lips, and continued to open the morning's letters.

Shortly afterwards, Mr. Skene arrived, and Mr. Mortimer prepared to follow him into his private room to discuss the mail and to receive his orders for the day. Mr. Mortimer's departure was ordinarily a sign for the clerks to stop work and give their whole attention to Mr. Donald. The moment the door closed on the head clerk Mr. Donald would take charge. He would lean back, his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, and survey the room expansively. He would exchange the compliments of the day with Mr. Adam and Mr. Mair, and then he would begin to bait Thirza or George, or sometimes both. He was always extremely witty, and in no time he had Mr. Adam snickering, his little head chopping up and down like a woodpecker's, while Mr. Mair, anxious to appear a good fellow but unable to conceal his uneasiness, tushed and shushed and giggled all in a breath.

This half-hour's entertainment occurred, with small variations,

every day, and Thirza had come to regard it as an inevitable part of the day's routine. But on this particular morning when Mr. Mortimer, having delicately inserted snuff in each nostril, having smoothed his coat lapels and taken the twelve precise steps which carried him from his desk to Mr. Skene's door—when Mr. Mortimer, having exactly enacted his customary rôle, had entered Mr. Skene's room and closed the door behind him with his usual neat click, Mr. Donald, to everyone's surprise, ignored his cue. Mr. Donald continued to write.

The clerks exchanged bewildered glances. The office boy cleared his throat and scuffed his feet meaningly.

Mr. Donald wrote on in silence.

"Good morning, Bill," Mr. Adam ventured.

"Morning," Mr. Donald said shortly. He turned a page of his ledger and went on writing.

Thirza watched Mr. Donald furtively out of the corner of one eye, and wondered like the rest. It was not difficult to guess that Mr. Donald had had a thrashing, and that this thrashing had knocked the wind well and truly out of Mr. Donald's sails. She took a malicious pleasure in the thought. She had only one regret, and that was that Mr. Mortimer had apparently lacked the courage to venture on his usual sarcastic examination.

In this, however, she did less than justice to the head clerk, for, later in the morning, Mr. Mortimer, who had merely been biding his time until he decided on a line of attack, affected to notice Mr. Donald's face for the first time. His hands went up in an old-maid's gesture of shock.

"Dear me," he said. "Dear me, Mr. Donald, whatever has been happening to your face?"

"My face?" Mr. Donald said vaguely.

"Your face," Mr. Mortimer said. "Your face is—ah—disfigured, as if by some violent contusion. Indeed, yes. I fear you must have met with an accident?"

"Yes, I met with an accident," Mr. Donald said.

"Pray specify it, sir."

"I fell downstairs."

"Downstairs," Mr. Mortimer repeated. "How unfortunate! How

very unfortunate for you, Mr. Donald! It must have been a steep stair."

Mr. Mortimer, like a lean and mangy old cat making the most of his play with a disabled mouse, tiptoed round to Mr. Donald's off-side and examined the damage there before Mr. Donald had time to raise a hand to cover it. "Mr. Donald," Mr. Mortimer said, in a voice designed to convey that the thought had just occurred to him, "I see now that your face is so grievously mutilated that if I did not know better, I might almost suspect—indeed yes, I might suspect that you had been—ah—fighting. I trust, Mr. Donald, that you will make it widely known that you owe your injuries, in fact, to a fall. I do not need to tell you that it would be most regrettable—it simply would not do, it would not do at all if the rumour got abroad that one of Skene's clerks had been—uh—implicated, as one might say, implicated in a brawl. To be blunt, if such a thought gained—yes credence, I would feel forced, forced—I would have no choice but to draw Mr. Skene's attention to the matter. Do I make myself—have I succeeded in making myself clear, Mr. Donald?"

Mr. Donald raised his battered face and glared in impotent fury at his tormentor. "You always succeed in making yourself crystal clear, Mr. Mortimer," he said.

"In that case," Mr. Mortimer said, having at last attracted his clerk's eyes from his ledger, "be good enough"—and his tone indicated that he had found Mr. Donald idling—"kindly be good enough to apply yourself to your work, Donald." And, well pleased with his handling of a delicate situation, Mr. Mortimer, smirking to himself, minced to his desk.

There was no more said that day.

But the following day, and on all the days of Mr. Donald's convalescence, Mr. Mortimer punctiliously enquired into the state of Mr. Donald's health. Thirza was no less polite. Each morning, as Mr. Donald came in, she raised suspiciously bright eyes to him, and, in a voice brimming over with compassion, asked after his face.

To all such queries Mr. Donald replied only with a scowl.

(2)

On the Sunday following Mr. Donald's "accident," Thirza paid her usual visit to the Daft Dominie. She found him seated at what

he called his writing-desk—a trestle table drawn up close to his bed and loaded with an extraordinary miscellany of objects—books by the score, apple cores, crusts, underwear, charcoal, beech leaves (for his mattress), bug lime, pressed wild flowers and skeleton leaves, crab shells, match paper, two gutta-percha soles for fixing on his boots before venturing to Kaysie, headache pills, a bottle of Jeffery's Patented Marine Glue for repairing the stem of his pipe, a tea kettle, a jar of leeches, lamp wicks made from old cotton stockings, a horseshoe, a pink flannel night-cap, rafe seed and cayenne pepper for the parrot, a pestle and mortar, a magnifying glass, water bulb, a pewter snuff-box, and a foot-long bar of yellow soap.

The Dominie was busy writing when Thirza came in, but, hearing the door flap behind her, he peered down an avenue of his possessions, made welcoming motions with his writing hand, and beamed, black-toothed, at her from the shelter of an over-large and filthy bandage which enveloped his head like a poke bonnet.

"I had forgotten," he said. "What a pleasing surprise! I had no idea it was the Sabbath." And his eyes came to rest, with bright expectancy, on her food pail.

Thirza laid down bottle and pail and eyed him. "Well," she said grimly, "and just exactly what have you been up to now?"

"Eh?" the Dominie said, startled. "Oh, I see." And he glanced at his left hand, which she then noticed was tucked into the V of his coat. "You mean my hand?"

"I didn't mean your hand," Thirza said. "But go on, what's the matter with it?"

"It's my wrist," the Dominie said. "Sprained, I think." And he lifted it into view. "You can see that it is swollen. It is also uncommon tender. Perhaps you would like to poultice it?"

Thirza sighed. "And your head?"

"Superficial hæmorrhage," the Dominie said airily. "A mere scratch. I had forgotten about my head. There is really no need for this bandaging. When I tried to remove it I found that it adhered, and so I left it. Pray take a seat. Draw up the victuals. But first have a look at Socrates. Poor bird, I have neglected him to-day. You can release him if you like. I have been too much occupied even to unveil him. Ah, Thirza, I have been doing noble work! I

have been composing a satire after Juvenal on the Vices and Inconveniences of the Burgh of Kaysie, and I think it has some quality. I feel sure you will like it. Pray listen."

"First," Thirza said, "you listen to me!" She lifted a tattered garment from the parrot's cage and opened the door. Socrates stepped out, eyed her balefully, squawked, fluttered from pile to pile of books, and came to rest lop-sidedly on the swathed top of his master's head.

Thirza stared from bird to man in exasperation, and they stared back at her, unwinking.

"You've been drinking again," she said. She sat down on a stool of books and sighed. "You needn't deny it, Dominie. I know the signs too well. Why do you do it, man; why do you keep on doing it? No, don't tell me. I've heard it all too often already." She sighed again, hopelessly. "Only, last time you promised so sincerely . . . I really thought . . . what *am* I going to do with you, Dominie?"

"My dear young lady," the Dominie said. "My dear young friend. . . ."

"I'm not your dear young friend," Thirza snapped. "I'm not your friend at all. I'm very angry with you. After all your sacred promises to me, the very least you could do is to have the grace to look ashamed of yourself."

"But, Thirza," the Dominie said, "I'm not ashamed. I have nothing to be ashamed of." And he shook his head so emphatically that the parrot lost its footing, and, with an indignant shriek, slithered down to his shoulder. "In the past," the Dominie said. "Admitted, in the past, I have sometimes been carried away by convivial companionship into some slight excess! Admitted, too, that on these rare occasions I have sometimes sustained injuries which might bear some superficial resemblance to the injuries from which I am now suffering; admitted even, my dear child, that your experiences are such as to justify such suspicions as you now so indignantly entertain; admitted, and admitted frankly this trinity of circumstances—nevertheless"—and here his voice rose in a pæan of triumph—"nevertheless, Thirza, though I grant the justice of your premises, I have to inform you—and I do so with pride and satisfaction—that these premises are, in fact, inadmissible, and that your entire syllogism is therefore false." He smiled hap-

pily, smugly, delighted to be innocent. "You see," he said, "I wasn't drunk."

She said grudgingly, "What happened to you, then?"

"I had an accident."

"Accidents," she said, "seem to be very fashionable just now. Have you any bread?"

"In the wardrobe."

She climbed over the encyclopædia section of the floor and lifted the lid of a teak sailor's chest which the Dominie had salvaged from the beach and which now served as his strong-box, his wardrobe, and his larder.

"The bread's under my hat," he said, "or it should be. What do you want it for?"

"Your poultice, of course. Are you going to tell me what happened to you?"

"I would prefer not to."

She was surprised. She carried the loaf to the table and cut off a slice with the Dominie's ragged-bladed bowie knife. She put fresh wood on the fire, rinsed out a dirty pannikin, filled it from the barrel of rainwater, and set it on the open fire to boil. "Now," she said, "while we're waiting, you can tell me all about this—accident." Watching him, she saw his thoughts flicker like gnats in the back of his eyes, and she knew that he meant to lie to her. "Dominie," she said abruptly, "you haven't been fighting, have you?"

He shook his head. He opened his mouth to say no, but she was interested only in his eyes, and his eyes had unmistakably said yes.

She said, "Dominie, you weren't fighting with Mr. Donald, were you?" And she saw another affirmative flicker and said promptly: "You were fighting with Mr. Donald, weren't you? Do you hear me, Dominie?"

"Yes," the Dominie said. "I hear you. And yes, I was fighting with Mr. Donald, although I cannot guess how you came to know it. Did someone tell you?"

She said, "The brute! What a fool you are, Dominie, to pit yourself against a strong young man like . . . oh, the brute!" She looked at the Dominie's white face and bandaged head and seethed with rage and indignation. "Oh, what a brute and a bully he is!"

The Dominie ignored her outburst. "A splendid young man," he said, and he nodded sagely. "Yes, an excellent young man, virile as a gladiator, with the heart of a lion, and the fists of a prize-fighter. My dear Thirza, I congratulate you on having such an admirable young man as your friend."

"Friend," Thirza said, wondering if he was still drunk. "Friend! What *are* you talking about? Who said anything about his being a friend of mine?"

"Champion, then. Should I say champion? Could it happen perchance that this fortunate youth is more than a friend?"

She understood his meaning perfectly and began to splutter with indignation.

"Ah-*ha*!" said the Dominie. "Ah-*ha*, Thirza, do I discern a blush?"

"You do not," she said. And she was so surprised and angry that she quite lost control of her tongue. "I'd as soon blush for a forky goloch. Fit's ta'en ye, man? Ye're haverin' like a gyte. Has the crack in your heid connached ye completely? Are ye dotty?" She stared earnestly into his eyes, and, having assured herself that they were no more bloodshot and no less shrewd than usual, withdrew something of the intensity of her gaze, pressed her knees primly together, and folded her hands on her lap. "Now," she said crisply, speaking without any trace of Scotch, "tell me all about it. Why were you fighting with Mr. Donald?"

"Therein lies the misapprehension," the Dominie said, wagging a green, vegetable-like finger in her face. "I fought with, *cum*, Mr. Donald; not with, in the sense of *contra*, against. I should perhaps have said *along with*. I think that, had I said *along with*, or, better, *in association with*, there would have been less likelihood of ambiguity. Mr. Donald and I fought together, not as antagonists, but as comrades in a common case against a common enemy."

Thirza shook her head and clucked in weary astonishment. "And who was this common enemy?"

"Louts," the Dominie said. "Raffish, ignorant louts."

"Who were they?"

"I don't remember."

"Oh yes, you do."

There was a short struggle of wills.

"Well," the Dominie said reluctantly, "there was McNab—Cocky McNab—and his cousin, and Cassie Annie's eldest, and Tarry Fleeman, and that hirsute-visaged young man who assists the blacksmith, and one or two others, but the identity of these others, I assure you, has quite escaped my memory."

"And who else was fighting on your side?"

"Nobody else. There was only myself and young Donald."

She looked at him searchingly. She was almost certain that he was telling the truth.

"And what were you fighting about?"

"Oddly enough," the Dominie said, "I don't seem able to remember."

"That is certainly odd," she said. "But perhaps you remember *where* you were fighting?"

"Yes," the Dominie said. "Oh yes. That is—I mean, well, frankly, Thirza, the fight started in the *Black Bull*."

"I thought as much."

"But stay! Don't misunderstand. It soon spread to outside. It was purely incidental that the fight should have started in the *Black Bull,* and it did not continue there for any appreciable length of time. It soon spread to outside, and it finished up against the stables in the yard."

She studied him. "And you really expect me to believe that you don't remember what this fight was about?"

"Yes," the Dominie said. "That is correct. I have quite forgotten the *casus belli*."

"You're a liar."

"Now, Thirza, that isn't polite."

"Maybe not, but it's true. What were you fighting about? You might as well tell me, Dominie. I'll get the truth out of you in the long run."

"There is always some sort of preliminary argument," the Dominie said, scratching his bandage, "although it is seldom of such consequence as to be worth recalling, and in this case I have to confess that my recollections of the circumstances are so vague and tenuous that I find myself quite unable to isolate any one incident, any single affirmation of fact or denial of that fact—a frequent cause of discord—which might reasonably be described as the major

cause of the conflict." He cocked his head on his shoulder and glanced shrewdly at her to see how she was taking it. "Wars are always unreasonable affairs," he said. "Do you think, Thirza, that the water has reached boiling-point?"

"I do not," Thirza said. "And I am still waiting to hear why you and Mr. Donald fought with these men?"

"It is all very vague," the Dominie said. "They were drunk."

"And you, of course, were sober?"

"Of course."

"And Mr. Donald?"

"He was sober too."

"All right. Now go on from there."

"Well," the Dominie said, "as I was saying, they were drunk and very quarrelsome, and Mr. Donald, if my memory serves me, took exception to some drunken remark, and so did I, and before I knew what was happening I was energetically implicated in these fisticuffs." He considered that. "Or at least I was lying against the stable door with my left arm twisted under my left hip and blood trickling down from my forehead into my eyes. I heard them say afterwards it was a noble fight."

"That's very interesting," Thirza said impatiently. "But you haven't yet told me why you were fighting. What I want to know is, what was it that was said that Mr. Donald and you disliked so much, and who said it?"

"It was Cocky McNab who said it," the Dominie told her. "I am quite sure of that, but the extraordinary thing is that I cannot for the life of me remember what he said."

She stared at him in exasperation. She knew that he was lying.

"It is my head," the Dominie said smugly. "I am having severe pains in my head, and I think it must be these pains which are making me so forgetful."

It seemed like an impasse. They measured each other warily, and then Thirza looked significantly at the food pail. She lifted the lid and glanced inside. "Roast chicken," she said. "A fine fat Dorking, or what's left of it at least. And a mutton cutlet. And greengage tart and a big hunk of that cheese you're so fond of." And she pointedly replaced the lid. "Stilton," she said.

The Dominie licked his lips.

She placed her hands on her knees and leaned forward. "Come on, out with it, Dominie. What did the McNabs say?"

"Well," the Dominie said, "frankly, it is not a statement that bears repeating. They were talking of a lady."

"They were talking of me, weren't they?"

"Well . . . yes. But how did you know?"

"Never mind that. What did they say?"

"No," the Dominie said emphatically. "No, I am not going to repeat it to you." There was a gleam of humour in his eye, but for all that she saw that this time he meant what he said. He would tell her no more. "Not for all the cheese in Stilton."

"You're very tiresome, Dominie. Well, at least, what did *you* say?"

"I said that you were only a child, and that I would not countenance such talk in my presence."

"That was very wrong of you," Thirza said. "I'm not a child. I'm a woman, and have been for years. But pray proceed. What did Mr. Donald say? I am very interested in Mr. Donald's part in this matter."

"Mr. Donald said he wouldn't stand for any lady's name to be bandied by such company and in such a place, and in particular, he said, a lady of your quality."

Thirza shook her head in a confusion of surprise and pleasure. "Mr. Donald . . . Mr. Donald said that?"

"Yes, Mr. Donald said that, and he lifted his glass—there, ah, happened to be a glass in his hand at the time—and threw it into the elder McNab's face."

"And then?"

"Then there was a great deal of fighting, of which I have only a confused recollection, for I was in some agitation at the time, and the next thing I know with any degree of certainty is that I woke up lying against the stable door with my arm twisted under me and blood streaming down my face."

"And Mr. Donald?"

"Mr. Donald had gone. I heard that he had been carried home in a sorry condition. The last I saw of him he was prostrate on the cobbles and someone was kicking him in the ribs. It was a deplor-

able exhibition. I do not wonder that you should be disgusted and distressed."

Thirza adjusted her face into what she hoped was a suitable expression of disgust and distress. In fact, she felt neither. Her only emotion was surprise—complete and utter astonishment that Mr. Donald should have entered the lists as her champion. And even after she had got over her first shock of surprise and could calmly examine her state of mind, she found in it no trace of outraged feelings. On the contrary, she felt extremely gratified.

She kept turning the incident over, touching in the Dominie's account with graphic, imagined details, until the picture of the fight was as fixed and real as a recollection of something which she had seen with her own eyes. She had no interest for the rest of that day in her lessons, and it was with the greatest difficulty that she applied even a portion of her mind to her Virgil. She wanted to be alone, to think only of the brawl in the *Black Bull,* to consider it from every point of view, to isolate and examine the motives of the men who had fought over her.

There could be no doubt about the compliment that Mr. Donald had paid her. And, of all the aspects of the affair, it was Mr. Donald's gallantry which intrigued and pleased her most. That Mr. Donald, of all people, should have taken her part, should actually have fought for her, should have battled till he was beaten into insensibility—well, it simply passed comprehension. It was something she would have to think out very carefully in order to understand. . . .

She made an excuse to the Dominie as soon as she reasonably could, and left him some hours before her usual time.

(3)

That night before going to bed she looked long and hard at her reflection in the mirror. She considered her appearance point by point, and she came to the pleasing conclusion that she was a good-looking girl. She was not pretty like Mistress Carmichael, nor beautiful like Susan, but at least she looked healthy, and she thought privately that she also looked nice. Her face had a shape all its own —broad across the high cheekbones and sloping in to a positive chin, still soft with adolescence, but showing sign of firmness to come.

Her hair was brown or black or slightly auburn according to the light which struck it. Her eyes were deep blue and adequately fringed with lashes of a darker shade than the hair of her head. Her mouth was wide, and she liked the way it lay when she caught it unawares, as if it was about to smile. Her lips were full, and red enough not to need biting, and her complexion and her teeth were as good as anybody's. Just a very short time ago she had feared that she had a peaked and narrow-chested look, but she noted now, not without a certain smugness, that she had filled out back and front, and had a sufficiency of flesh in all the appropriate places.

She went to bed well pleased with herself, had a distressing dream in which she belaboured Mr. Donald over the head and bare shoulders with a horse-whip, and woke in excellent spirits, eager to tackle the new week's work, and curious to see Mr. Donald out of her newly enlightened eyes.

Alas, Mr. Donald disappointed her. He looked just the same. Although she now knew what a noble and chivalrous young man he was, she could not help thinking that he did not look a whit more noble or chivalrous than he had looked before. His left eye was still discoloured, his jaw was still swollen, his lips were still puffy, and the total effect was every bit as disagreeable as ever. It didn't make a scrap of difference to tell herself that poor Mr. Donald had got those ugly injuries on her behalf. She could, and did repeatedly, assure herself that she was sorry for him, but she did not honestly feel it. She had suffered too much at Mr. Donald's hands to be able to reverse her natural emotions at a moment's notice. She did not, even now, regret that Mr. Donald had had a thrashing. She felt that he had richly deserved it.

She was aware that she had a debt to pay, however, and, when Mr. Mortimer retired into Mr. Skene's room for his daily instructions, she cleared her throat and addressed herself across two desks to Mr. Donald. "Mr. Donald," she said earnestly. "I wonder if you would help me with a difficulty? I am copying three bills of lading for the master of the *Auralia,* and there is a reference, which I have noticed also in all the other bills I have copied, to the 'barratry of the Master and Crew.' What does this mean, Mr. Donald?"

"Barratry?" Mr. Donald said. "Let me see. . . . Barratry is some sort—any sort—of fraud practised by the master of a ship on the

owners or insurers of the cargo by means of which he—or the crew—gain some profit at the expense of the aforesaid owners or insurers."

"I see," said Thirza, reflecting that Mr. Donald was really a very able young man, and that his definition of barratry was almost word for word the definition in the Dominie's dictionary. "Fraud?"

"Fraud," Mr. Donald said, nodding.

"Thank you very much," Thirza said meekly. "I often encounter phrases which I have not seen before, and I am sometimes quite unable to understand them."

"I should always be glad to assist you, Mistress Gare," Mr. Donald said stiffly.

"Thank you very much," Thirza said again.

From that time on her position in the office underwent a noticeable change. She was not baited again. For a few days she was left strictly to herself, and then Mr. Donald, with consummate tact, began to bring her into general office conversations. The other clerks, as usual, took their lead from Mr. Donald, and she soon found, to her great delight, that she was being treated as an equal in business matters and that she was even occasionally being deferred to. She was at last being regarded as she regarded herself: as a clerk and a lady.

Thirza thrived on the new conditions. She became sociable, and sometimes, behind Mr. Mortimer's back, even garrulous. She liked to talk about her work, and her enthusiasm was so infectious and her talk so sensible that even Mr. Adam, who had never before given a thought to the curing industry, was inspired to give his new-found opinion on the relative merits of Lisbon and Liverpool salt, the legality of trawling in the Moray Frith, the advisability of retaining the brand, and a host of such controversial business subjects.

Thirza did not make the mistake of taking her new status for granted. She still had the shadow of the word *temporary* hanging over her, and she still had occasional doubts of Mr. Donald. She continued to work at full stretch, determined to prove to Mr. Mortimer that she was indispensable, and she continued to keep a wary eye on Mr. Donald, ensuring his good behaviour by her own. She made regular demands on his chivalry; she asked his advice on

matters on which she was already well-informed; and she took care to show a becoming feminine ignorance of all the topics on which he spoke with most authority.

These tactics served her admirably. Mr. Mortimer began to impose on her by giving her too much work and Mr. Donald treated her as a perfect gentleman would treat a perfect lady. She was very pleased with herself. She was rash enough to think that she had learned the art of handling men.

CHAPTER XI

(1)

THE FOLLOWING YEAR THE FISHING was very bad, and the usual ghoulish whispers began to rustle through the Fishertown. The most persistent of the rumours concerned Skene's. It was common knowledge that Skene's had been hard hit by the bankruptcy of Kromberg & Froebel, one of the best-known houses in Stettin, and gossip had it that Mr. Skene could not now meet his obligations and was on the point of selling out to his biggest rival, the Moray Frith Curing Company, managed by Messrs. Robertson & Craig, and owned by Mr. Richard Carmichael. There was so much uneasiness in the yard that Mr. Skene had a notice posted in the office window in which he categorically denied (1) that Skene's was in difficulties, and (2) that he was negotiating with the Moray Frith.

"Skene's will carry on," he wrote, "as always."

Despite this assurance, the rumour remained alive, and flared up anew one morning in late August, when an elegant carriage, flanked with the Carmichael crest, swept through the yard gates.

Richard Carmichael, observed by every eye in the yard, stepped from the carriage and stalked into the office.

Thirza had occasionally caught glimpses of Janet and Susan Carmichael as they drove through Kaysie in the chaise, but she had not seen Richard Carmichael since that last unhappy day in Carmichael House, and it was with a real sense of shock that she now saw him walk through the office door.

Mr. Carmichael, slapping his lavender-coloured gloves on the palm of his left hand, looked down his long disdainful nose at Mr. Mortimer, and Mr. Mortimer, too alarmed to be unctuous, leapt to his feet, and, without a word, bolted into Mr. Skene's private room. He emerged at his normal speed a few seconds later, and, with all due ceremony, bowed Mr. Carmichael in.

Thirza kept her head down. She was surprised at her

own confusion. Her face was on fire and her limbs atremble.

She strained to hear what was going on behind that closed door, but neither Mr. Skene nor Mr. Carmichael was a shouting man, and she could hear nothing. After what seemed a very long time the door opened, and she snatched a furtive glimpse of the two men in the doorway.

"I'm to take it, then," Mr. Carmichael said, "that that's your last word on the subject, Skene?"

"Precisely," Mr. Skene said.

There was a sudden flurry of activity as Mr. Mortimer scurried to open the outer door.

"A nice day, Mr. Carmichael sir," Mr. Mortimer's voice said anxiously. "Indeed, a nice summer day. Good day to you, sir."

From outside Thirza heard the familiar creaking of the chaise and MacGregor's peremptory cluck to the mare. She ventured to look up then. Her eyes touched Mr. Skene's for an instant, and she fancied that there was a cold and hostile quality in his face that she had never seen there before. She shuddered and dropped her gaze again to her ledger.

"Mortimer," Mr. Skene said, speaking right across the office, very crisply and distinctly. "Mr. Carmichael is not to be allowed entry into my yard again. Neither Mr. Carmichael nor Mr. Robertson nor Mr. Craig nor any of their employees. Not under any circumstance." And, for the first time in Thirza's experience, Mr. Skene slammed his door.

The incident gave rise to a great deal of talk in the yard, and there was universal satisfaction that Willie, as his employees affectionately called him, had sent Carmichael off with a flea in his lug. The rumours were not yet scotched, however, for soon there were new whispers, which could be traced to the managers of the Moray Frith, that William Skene was playing a deep game: although he had repulsed the Moray Frith in public, he was still secretly flirting with the company. He was manœuvring for a good price. . . .

Thirza refused to believe a word of those rumours. She knew that Skene's, like every other curing business, was having a bad year, but she also knew that Skene's was not the kind of business which went bankrupt as the result of any one year's trading. Skene's had capital, credit, tradition. Why, Skene's was one of the oldest

yards in Scotland. It was absurd to think that Skene's could be in serious financial difficulties.

(2)

In the middle of September there were two exceptional days of fishing, and, by that strange element of chance which makes curing such a fascinating gamble, it was almost entirely Skene's which profited, for Skene's boats, operating, not as a fleet, but as individual boats in a fleet made up of the boats of several curers, came in loaded to their gunwales with bumper catches, while the other curers' boats, which had fished alongside the Skene boats and in exactly the same way, landed only fair to middling hauls. Mr. Mortimer explained it simply.

"An act of God," he said.

For three days and nights every man, woman, and child on Skene's books was put to work on the cure, and at the end of that time a great monumment of barrels was raised in the shed. After fifteen days of indifferent fishing there was another spurt of activity. The monument was broken down so that the barrels could be upended, unpickled, refilled and resalted, blown and bunged tight, and inscribed with the final curing marks. The cure was now complete. The monument was reassembled, and was ready for the brand.

The Fishery Officer came two days later.

It had seemed to Thirza, when she first went to work at Skene's, that a visit from the Fishery Officer was a matter of great importance, and she had watched with her heart in her mouth as he selected specimen barrels for examination—barrels that might contain fish which she herself had gutted and which might be rejected on so many grounds that it could only be called miraculous that they ever were passed for brand. But as she became accustomed to the Fishery Officer's routine visits, to his superficial inspections and to his invariable content, she lost all sense of his importance, she ceased to take nqte of the days when he was due to inspect a consignment, and came to take it for granted that Skene's cure was faultless, and that Skene's cure always would be passed for brand.

She was wrong.

It was Mr. Donald who first noticed that there was something strange happening in the yard that Friday morning. He called Mr.

Mortimer's attention to the phenomenon, and Mr. Mortimer, peering short-sightedly out of the window, admitted that there appeared to be unusual activity in the vicinity of the shed, but took Mr. Donald to task for his choice of words.

"*Strange* things," he said severely, "do not happen at Skene's."

Nevertheless, Mr. Mortimer was perturbed and, after sitting down at his desk and slowly sharpening a pencil, after testing the point of this pencil and placing it in his breast pocket, after carrying a bundle of papers through to Mr. Skene's room, and after rebuking George for having failed to clear Mr. Skene's waste-paper basket—after these deliberate indications of normality Mr. Mortimer proceeded by casual stages to the door, stood there audibly sniffing the air, and then, quite suddenly, disappeared.

The clerks rushed to the window.

There was no work being done in the yard. The work-people were grouped in a horseshoe round the entrance to the shed, and beyond them, inside a circle of opened barrels from the monumental cure, stood Mr. Skene and the Fishery Officer and the foreman cooper.

"There's something far wrong," Mr. Donald said. "My God, look at Morty!"

Mr. Mortimer, his frock-coat streaming astern, was running, lifting his knees high, actually running, towards the shed..

"Let's go!" Mr. Donald said.

Out in the yard Thirza cast a swift glance around. No one was watching. The other clerks and the office boy were racing ahead. She lifted her skirts and ran like a man.

Reaching the shed, she tacked herself on to the edge of the crowd. She stood on tiptoe and craned her neck to see Mr. Skene's face. Mr. Skene was talking. She listened intently.

"I can't understand it," Mr. Skene was saying. "Simply can't understand it, Tom. Maybe, if you were to try some of the other barrels. . . ."

"Even if I opened all the other barrels I still couldn't pass the cure, Mr. Skene," the Fishery Officer said. He gestured with a wide sweep of his arm. "Here's these three barrels out of the first five barely half-full. I'm sorry, Mr. Skene."

"I can't understand it," Mr. Skene said again. Poor Mr. Skene,

he stared at the Fishery Officer and he stared at the barrels. He didn't seem to know what to say. "In all the time I've been a curer . . . it can't be true . . . they can't be my barrels." He looked at the foreman cooper. "Who checked these barrels, Sandy?"

"I must hev checked them masel', Mr. Skene."

"In that case," Mr. Skene said, "what's the explanation?"

Sandy Flett shook his head. There was a ripple of movement in the crowd as gutters and coopers exchanged uneasy glances. Even Thirza felt guilty. . . .

"Well," Mr. Skene said, his voice rasping. "I'm waiting. What's your explanation, man?"

"I jist dinna ken foo it could a come aboot, Mr. Skene."

For a moment there was silence. Thirza saw Mr. Skene's teeth come down on his lower lip, and in sympathy bit her own lip till it hurt. And now Mr. Skene was turning back to the Fishery Officer. . . .

"Listen, Tom; I'm at a loss . . . frankly, I can't explain it. I would say it just couldn't happen at my yard. . . ."

"But it has happened, Mr. Skene."

"All I can say at the moment is that there's been some mistake, some—inexplicable mistake. You know me, Tom. You know my reputation. I never expected to be asking favours of you, but I'm asking one now. This entire consignment is due to be shipped tomorrow. The ship's here now in the Bay, she's coming in on the afternoon tide, and if I lose this consignment I'll be hard pressed. Candidly, I've had a bad year, as no doubt you know. I've already sold every barrel in this shed as a Crown branded, and I'm depending on this sale. Inspect the rest, Tom. Make a thorough examination, and if the rest are sound, as I guarantee they will be, pass the cure. Will you do that for me, Tom? Open every barrel in the consignment."

"It wouldn't be any good, Mr. Skene. I'm sorry."

"Why not? And why Mr. Skene? It's always been Tom and William with us before."

"It's always been plain-sailing before," Mr. Ogilvie said. "Maybe you don't realise it, Mr. Skene, but what you are asking me to do is to connive at a felony."

"I'm asking nothing of the sort, man. All I'm asking you to do

is to consider my reputation, to consider the part I and my father before me have played in this industry in this district for thirty years. You know I'm not one of your cheapjack curers out only for a quick profit. You know I run my yard efficiently, and that I wouldn't stoop to this"—he indicated the barrels—"this sort of miserable dishonesty. Surely you know that, and surely you can appreciate that some sort of wretched mistake has occurred? All I'm asking you to do is to accept my word that there's been a mistake with those three barrels and to make a further token examination, or if you like, to inspect every other barrel in the consignment."

"Now, Mr. Skene," Mr. Ogilvie said, "you know my duties and my orders as well as I know them myself. . . ."

"If you're going to refuse, Tom," Mr. Skene said, "and I see that you are, I can assure you that I know your duties a great deal better than you appear to know them yourself."

"Now, Mr. Skene, be reasonable; there's no use losing your temper. I'm here to do my job, and I do it to the best of my ability. My personal feelings don't enter into it at all. If you're not pleased, you can have the arbiter. I've made a token inspection, and three out of the first five barrels I examine are short, short not only of fish, but of salt too. You can't argue past that, and you can't tell me what my duty is, for I know it, and I do it, no matter how painful it may be; and it is painful, very painful indeed, on an occasion like this. As for those three barrels being a mistake— well, that's as it may be, only I cannot give you the brand, and I could not give the brand even if the rest of the lot was good. I'm sorry, but that's how it is. Still, as I said before, you can have the arbiter if you're not satisfied."

"I'm far from satisfied," Mr. Skene said. "For one thing, Tom, *Mr. Ogilvie,* I don't think you're as hide-bound as you're making yourself out to be. I think I'm beginning to understand what this is all about. You've gone over to Carmichael."

"Be careful, Mr. Skene. Be careful. A man in my position doesn't go over, as you say, to anyone. I'm on good terms with Mr. Carmichael as I'm on good terms with every other *honest* man in the business, but if you are suggesting that I have allowed myself to be influenced in the course of my duty . . ."

"I'm suggesting nothing, Mr. Ogilvie. I was merely thinking

aloud, and no doubt I was indiscreet in doing so. This conversation has continued long enough. Seal the consignment. I'll have the arbiter. But I won't have anybody from the Moray Frith."

"It'll have to be next week."

This was on a Friday.

"Monday then," Mr. Skene said.

"I doubt if I can manage Monday."

"I can't hold up that ship any longer," Mr. Skene said. "It has to be Monday. And not later than ten a.m. What like is the tide, Monday, Sandy?"

"Noonday," the foreman said. "Maybe a bittie after, Mr. Skene."

"Well, I'll try what I can do for Monday," Mr. Ogilvie said. "But I don't promise."

"Mr. Ogilvie," Mr. Skene said sharply. "I have some influence in this district and in Scottish fishing generally. I have never used a threat on any man before, but I assure you that if the meeting with the arbiter is not arranged for Monday morning, and ten o'clock on Monday morning, I shall take steps to have you relieved of your appointment. My request for Monday is very reasonable in the circumstances. I advise you to see to it that that meeting is duly convened."

There was a spontaneous growl of sympathy from the onlookers, and Mr. Skene, appearing only then to become aware of their existence, turned sharply and made a shooing gesture with his arms. "What are you all doing, standing about there like sheep? Get back to your work. What do you think I pay you wages for? Sandy, Mortimer—see that these men and women get back to work immediately."

Without another glance at Mr. Ogilvie, Mr. Skene turned away, and, his hands behind his back, walked slowly towards his office. By the time he reached it his clerks were seated at their desks. They did not raise their faces as he entered, but each stole a glance at him as he passed, and the moment he had disappeared into his room they laid down their quills and began to whisper.

Mr. Donald was positive that Willie had hit the nail on the head when he accused the Fishery Officer of having gone over to Carmichael. "This is all Carmichael's doing," he said emphatically. "The barrels and all. When did you ever hear of Skene's barrels

being underweight? It couldn't happen. You know that, Mistress Gare, you worked in the yard. There's the packer and the cooper and the dunter for the first time, and the foreman cooper and the packer again when the barrels are being topped up. All that number of folks couldn't have missed noticing that a barrel was only three-quarters full."

"But they *did* miss noticing," Thirza said.

"Not them. These barrels were never filled at Skene's and Willie knows it. It was some of Carmichael's crowd that stacked them among the others and marked the spot so that Tom Ogilvie knew exactly which barrels to say he wanted opened. That's why Willie asked for the rest of the barrels to be inspected. He knew fine that there wouldn't likely be more than just these three bad barrels in the whole lot, and it all depends now whether he can persuade the arbiter that there's been some monkey business."

"The trouble is," Mr. Mair reminded them, "that old Sandy said the barrels were ours."

They considered that. If the barrels really were Skene's, it would be almost impossible to prove that anyone but Skene's employees had filled them. Besides, nobody would believe that a man like Mr. Carmichael could be implicated in a shady affair like this. They could hardly believe it themselves.

(3)

All day long the workpeople, in twos and threes, gathered at the shed to inspect the barrels which had been refused the brand and which now stood sealed and separated from the rest of the cure pending the arbiter's decision.

There could be no doubt that the barrels were genuinely Skene's. The coopers not only recognised them, but, with their extraordinary eye for wood and workmanship, could tell which cooper had made each barrel. The curing marks were also Skene's. Each cooper had his own small peculiarities in the marking of a barrel, and, though these could be reproduced, there was general agreement that, in this case, they had not been copied. These barrels were Skene's barrels with Skene's markings, and the only explanation that the foreman cooper could offer for their contents was that they had been tampered with after the consignment was stacked.

Thirza was kept busy in the office all day. She had a quick look at the barrels during the midday break, but it was not till seven o'clock in the evening, when her day's work in the office was finished, that she managed to find time to make her own private and very thorough investigation.

Scrutinising the markings, she recognised in one the hand of Jeems—Jamie Cruden, who had generally marked the barrels which she and Agsiv had gutted, and, looking closely, she found the small S which indicated that this barrel had been packed by Sievwright—Agnes Sievwright.

She got down on her knees and studied the mark at a distance of inches. She scratched it with a finger-nail. Yes, it was as she thought. The S had a tail—a small vertical scratch attached to the lower arc of the letter, thus: Ș. She was not surprised that no one had commented on this scratch, for it was of significance only to Jeems and herself, and Jeems was not a thinking man. She sat back, her haunches on her heels, and considered this phenomenon.

How did it come about that such a barrel had got included in a lot which was cured only this week? She looked at the scratch again, remembering how these scratches had first come to exist. . . .

"Jeems," she had said, in the days when she was a gutter, "why should it only be Agsiv that gets her initial on the barrel when it's me that does all the work?"

She had been joking, and even Jeems had known that she was joking.

"Weel," Jeems had said, "fit aboot this?" And he had drawn a stroke under the S, so that it stood as if on a pedestal: Ș. "Fit d'ye think a that?" he demanded. " 'T' for Thirzy."

Thirza had thought that excellent and said so, and thereafter Jeems and she had shared a private joke.

"Dinna forget, Jeems," she would say meaningly, seeing him about to mark a barrel.

"I'll nae forget," Jeems said.

And he never had. . . .

It was now more than a year since Thirza had worked as a gutter, yet here, on a barrel which presumably had been packed only a fortnight ago, was her mark.

The significance of her discovery broke, like an explosion, in her

mind. She got to her feet, and, with one last backward glance at the barrel, ran off down the yard, out of the gate and along the Shore towards the Fishertown. People stared as she passed, stopped in their tracks, and turned to stare and to comment. She paid no attention. She had room in her mind for only one thought. That S with its tell-tale stroke. That little stroke which might prove foul play and save the cure. It all depended on Jeems. Had Jeems gone on marking the strokes on Agsiv's barrels after she, Thirza, had left the crew? If he hadn't, then her discovery was plainly of the greatest importance, for if Jeems hadn't stroked his "Ss" since her time as a gutter, it would mean that the date on the barrel had been altered and that this barrel was more than a year old; and this extremely odd circumstance, allied to Mr. Skene's good name, would surely be enough to convince the arbiter that there had been foul play, that someone, somehow, had got hold of used, unbranded Skene barrels, had partly filled them, and had planted them, with a view to their being found, in prominent positions in the new consignment.

She was out of breath when she reached Jeems's house, and she did not waste an unnecessary word on his wife.

"Is he in?" she panted.

"He's at his tay." The wife stood aside, and Thirza stumbled past her into the hut.

"Ay?" said Jeems, glancing up, his mouth full of fish.

"Jeems," she said. "It's important, very important. You remember the strokes you used to make on Agsiv's barrels for me? The 'Ts.' Remember, you used to make a strokie at the foot of the S?"

"I mind fine," Jeems said.

"Fitina strokies is that?" his wife demanded.

"Never mind, wumman."

"Well, did you ever make them after I stopped working with Agsiv, after I went into the office? Try to remember, Jeems. Did you?"

"No."

"Jeems, are you absolutely certain?"

"I nivver had ony call to pit the strokie on efter you stoppit wi' the guttin'," Jeems said.

"Would you swear it?"

"Ah would."

"Even in a court of law?"

Jeems was a cautious man. He considered for several seconds. He held up a haddock skin reflectively and nipped off a mouthful of meat with his front teeth. He chewed, and as he chewed he scowled, thinking.

"Would you, Jeems?" Thirza begged. "Would you swear it in a court of law?"

"Ay, even there," Jeems said.

Thirza raced back to the yard. . . .

Mr. Mortimer was alone in the office. He was sucking his pencil point, and as she burst into the office he removed it from his mouth with a guilty air. He peered at her short-sightedly, shook his head and tushed disapprovingly, and when she began to speak he immediately interrupted. He said, "Close the door," and burrowed his head into his shoulders against a possible draught.

She closed the door.

"Mr. Mortimer," she said. "I've found out something important. At least, I think it's important. About the cure." She told him the whole story, explaining the stroke at the base of the S with the aid of Mr. Mortimer's own moistened pencil which, in her excitement, she snatched from his hand, and which, in his own excitement, Mr. Mortimer quite forgot to recover from her. He followed her at the first telling, and before she had finished he was exclaiming in shrill, varied yelps like a whole pack of hounds on a hot scent.

"Bless my soul! Dear me! Upon my word! Good gracious me!" He got up with surprising agility and began to struggle into his coat. "This is indeed important information. Most important. Mr. Skene must be told at once."

They went to the door together.

"The gas," Mr. Mortimer said. He went back and turned it off. "Now is there anything we have forgotten? Hat, muffler, my keys? No, I have them here." He locked the door. "Most important information," he said. "Yes indeed. You showed acumen, Mistress Gare. Acumen. Mr. Skene must be told, informed, acquainted with the news. Yes, at once." He moved off with a hobbling action that was somewhere between a walk and a run, and Thirza, suddenly aware that she was very tired, followed him slowly down the yard.

CHAPTER XII

(1)

LATE ON MONDAY MORNING NEWS reached the yard that the arbiter had granted the brand, and on Monday afternoon Mr. Skene sent word that he wished to see Mistress Gare at the White House. The White House, Mr. Skene's home, was a prominent landmark, a square and ugly building, harled with pure white roughcast, surrounded by high, white-harled walls, and situated on the edge of the Marroch cliffs half a mile to the east of the town of Kaysie.

Here, in the front drawing-room in the White House, seated on an unyielding cornucopia sofa and surrounded by massive mahogany furniture, brass gilt candelabra, and hundredweights of display china, Thirza received Mr. Skene's congratulations on saving the consignment, and then, to her great surprise, his confidences.

"I am fifty-three years of age," Mr. Skene said, "and, candidly, I do not enjoy good health. You will have noticed that I have not attended the office since Friday. I have been confined to the house with a recurrence of the obscure chest complaint with which I am frequently troubled, and Dr. Grant has been very frank with me. He has told me that he cannot cure me and that no one else can, and as a result I do not have the life expectation of the normal man of my age. Are you, perchance, surprised to learn my age?"

"No," Thirza said, puzzled. "I hadn't thought about it."

"I had thought perhaps that you might have thought me younger. No matter. By the way, how old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"Almost nineteen, no doubt?"

"No," Thirza said. "I'm newly eighteen."

Mr. Skene raised his eyebrows. "You surprise me. Just as you might have thought me younger, so I most certainly thought you much older. I have repeatedly noticed you in the office, Mistress Gare, and I have been most favourably impressed by your

work. Mr. Mortimer too has given me glowing reports of you."

"Mr. Mortimer," she said, bewildered. "Glowing . . ."

"Glowing reports," Mr. Skene repeated. "Mr. Mortimer thinks very highly of you."

She shook her head in a confusion of surprise and delight.

"I believe, too, that you have decided opinions on improvements which might be made in the business generally. Mr. Mortimer, of course, is somewhat conservative, and in consequence he has not passed on these opinions to me. Mr. Donald, however, came to see me one day, and made me several most constructive suggestions, all of which, he was most anxious to assure me, were not his ideas, but yours. Some of these ideas, like the new form of fisherman's agreement and the use of the half-barrel for the home market, seem uncommonly sensible to me, and I think you will be pleased to know that I mean to adopt them."

Thirza stared at Mr. Skene in honest bewilderment. That Mr. Mortimer should have given glowing reports of her, that Mr. Donald should have gone to Mr. Skene with her ideas, that Mr. Skene himself should actually be adopting some of her ideas—these were difficult facts to comprehend all in a heap. She stared into Mr. Skene's eyes, and then, becoming aware of them suddenly as a pair of eyes staring back into her own, she looked down at her hands in her lap and blushed faintly. She felt a whiff of self-importance. She was aware that Mr. Skene was regarding her with the greatest of respect; she was inclined to think that she deserved it.

Mr. Skene said: "I thought it very commendable of Mr. Donald to exercise so much zeal in forwarding your interests with me. Is it possible—I have wondered—have you perhaps some understanding with Mr. Donald?"

"Understanding?" Thirza enquired, looking up.

"Understanding," Mr. Skene said. He gave so much emphasis to the word that it was quite clear what he meant. "Are Mr. Donald and you? . . ."

"Oh no!" Thirza said, and colour rushed to her cheeks at the thought. "No, no, of course not."

"Some other young man, then?"

"Oh no, Mr. Skene. No one."

"I have heard it said," Mr. Skene said, smiling, "that you have no interest in young men, but I must say that I find that hard to believe."

"It is perfectly true," Thirza said. "I find young men very tiresome."

"I wonder why that is?"

"I don't know," Thirza said. "I just know that I don't feel very trusting with young men, and I find them very difficult to talk to. With the Dominie—Mr. Christie, I mean—and some of the old men in the yard I can talk effortlessly, but I can't talk with the young men, they don't seem to want to talk sensibly." She saw that Mr. Skene was interested, and she considered the matter further, knitting her brows, applying her mind seriously to the problem of herself. "I think," she said, "that I must be different from most other girls, Mr. Skene."

"Mistress Gare," Mr. Skene said, with a little chuckle, "I am quite, quite sure that you are. In all my experience I have never come across anyone like you. Now I want to say something which I find . . . very difficult to say." He got up and walked to the window, stood staring across the Bay, his hands clasped behind his back. "Mistress Gare, I beg you not to be alarmed, and I beg you not to reply hastily when you hear what I have to say." His hands moved: the fingers flexed, intertwined, became still. "I wish to ask you to marry me. Please don't reply hastily, Mistress Gare. You must be aware, I think, that I have regarded you with interest and admiration for some time. I do not find it easy to make speeches of this sort, for it is many years since I have had intimate conversation with a lady, and I am anxious not to say anything which is likely to distress you. Am I distressing you, Mistress Gare?"

"No," Thirza said.

"I am not a rich man," Mr. Skene said, "although in my lifetime I have from time to time been passing rich and may be again if we have some good years of fishing. I am moderately well off, however, and this house is very comfortable. You would lack for nothing. And, although the subject is no doubt distasteful to you, I must emphasise that you will not be saddled with me in my old age." The hands moved again; Thirza fancied that she saw them smile. "I shall not live to be an old man. Do I shock you?"

Thirza considered that. "No," she said.

He turned to look at her, and she saw him then for the first time, not as an employer, but as a human being—a man of medium height, stockily built, with a pleasant, humorous face, in which the eyes were notably blue and youthful. She thought in words, slowly and wonderingly: "He's asked me . . . to . . . marry him. Me!" She was proud and bewildered.

"Could you consider it?" he asked gently. "I mean . . . marrying me?"

"I don't know," she said. It would have been much easier if he had gone on staring out of the window. Face to face with him, she was disconcerted. She found that she was trembling. She dug her heels into the carpet and raised her toes, and her legs became still. She rearranged her hands in her lap, but could not quiet them: they twitched and throbbed in spite of her, as though they did not belong to her. "I have never been proposed to before," she said.

"But you don't find it displeasing?"

"I find it . . . pleasing," she admitted.

"Then you'll consider it?" Mr. Skene asked. He looked very young and boyish, and so absurdly anxious that a wave of compassion swept over her, draining away her nervousness. She looked at him with sympathy and understanding. She knew that she was in a strong position, and she had the momentary feeling that of the two it was she who was the older and wiser. She also felt very gracious and very desirable. She smiled with pleasure and lowered her eyes demurely to her hands.

"If I were to marry you," she said, "would I be able to go on working in the office?"

"No," Mr. Skene said, reflecting. "I hardly think that would be proper."

She was disappointed. "I am very interested in the business," she said.

"I know, I know you are," Mr. Skene said hastily. "And if we were to be married you could of course continue to take an active interest. I would discuss everything with you. In fact, you could have an office here in the house if you wished. Yes, you could have the sun parlour. I would bring you all the papers you required from the office. There would be no need for you to lose touch."

Thirza nodded, pleased. She was still too surprised to be able to consider Mr. Skene's proposal seriously; nevertheless, she was already beginning to weigh up the pros and cons. She thought very hard. "I would have to discuss it with Manson before I decided," she said.

"Yes, of course. You must consider it carefully. Who is Manson?"

"My housekeeper."

Mr. Skene cleared his throat. If he was surprised to learn that this fisher-girl had a housekeeper he did not show it. He went off, far from confidently, on a tack of his own. "Mention of a housekeeper reminds me," he said. "I presume you would wish to bring your housekeeper here?"

"Yes."

"Yes, of course. You know, I suppose, that I have a sister? You have met her, I think?"

"She showed me in when I came," Thirza said.

"Jannet is a very fine woman," Mr. Skene said. "I am sure that you and Jannet would like each other very well, but at the same time I feel that if you were to do me the honour of marrying me Jannet would probably wish to go to live with her widowed sister in Aberdeen. I have not discussed it in any way with Jannet, but I know how her mind works, and I am sure that she would feel that my wife ought to be sole mistress in my house. She is very attached to her sister, and the social life of Aberdeen would be most congenial to her. You must not feel that you would be driving Jannet out, for in fact I think she would have left long ago had she not felt that it was her duty to remain with me. Now, is there anything else? Perhaps you would like to see over the house?"

"I would like very much to see the house," Thirza said, staring at the carpet. "But first I must tell you something, Mr. Skene. I have not thought a great deal about marriage, but there is one thing I have always been sure of. I could only marry for love."

"I see," Mr. Skene said. "I see." And he paused, plainly disconcerted, for a long moment. "And I presume that you could not come to have such a feeling for me?"

She did not reply.

"Could you, Thirza?"

"I don't know," she said, and there was just a touch of asperity in her voice. "But what is just as important is that you have not yet told me if you have such a feeling for me."

"I can assure you that I have that feeling for you," Mr. Skene said.

She traced a pattern on the carpet with her toe, and then, becoming aware that not only her boot but also an inch of ankle was visible, she drew her foot modestly under the hem of her dress and sat still, thinking. "I would like to hear you say it," she said at last.

"Well," Mr. Skene said in a gruff, stubborn voice. "I love you, if that's what you want me to say." And, seeing a secret smile lift the corners of her mouth, he said, speaking naturally and urgently, "I love you very much, Thirza."

Smiling faintly, she raised her face to him. "It's not the same as it is in books, is it?" she said.

(2)

It was a long week. Mr. Skene's proposal possessed her mind. She thought about it exclusively in the office, discussed it each evening with Manson, pondered it for hours in bed each night. She lost her grasp of facts and her awareness of people. She became vague and abstracted, and on Sunday morning in church was so unlike herself that she not only did not follow Whisky Johnny's sermon point by point, but could not even have told his text. She thumbed her Bible automatically, stood up and sat down with the rest, went through all the usual motions, and had not the faintest idea of what was going on around her.

After the benediction Whisky Johnny pounded on his Bible for attention, fixed her with an imperious gesture, and thundered, "A word with you, Thirza Gare!" but she did not hear even this, and would have filed out with the rest of the congregation if Jeannie Stuart, in the pew behind, had not stuck a finger into the small of her back and said, "Meenister wants ye, Thirzy."

She was conscious then of having heard her name from the pulpit, and she immediately pulled herself together and turned to meet the Minister, who had descended the pulpit steps two at a time and who was now lurching, with his rolling sailor's gait, up the aisle to meet her.

"I winna detain ye lang," he said, and, grasping her firmly by the elbow, he conducted her back along the aisle and thrust her into the vestry.

"Sit doon," he commanded. He flung off his robes and tossed them at Mr. Jamieson, the beadle, a very old and pernickety man, who caught them deftly, but who felt constrained to protest that such an action was not in keeping with the dignity of the Sabbath.

"Hud your tongue, Jeemy," Mr. Simpson said. "I am willin' to grant that ye may ken mair aboot theology than I do, but nae man kens mair than me aboot the pittin' on an' takin' aff o' my ain claes. Noo awa' wi ye, glower an' a'. I dinna want your muckle ear-holes clutterin' up the vestry."

The beadle retired, grumbling, and Whisky John Simpson delved into his pockets. "Noo that man's gone, faur's my pipe? Ah, here 'tis." He drew it out, a much-bitten, smoke-grimed clay cutty which had once been white. "Sit doon," he said again to Thirza, indicating the bench at the long communion table. She sat down primly, while Whisky Johnny, giving her a reassuring nod, hoisted himself on to the table, struck a match-paper, and puffed away at the lighting of his pipe. "In the Auld Kirk noo," he said between puffs, "the Meenister is a gentleman, and smokes, so they tell me, a Meerschaum pipe. A Meerschaum is a vairry aristocratic kind o' pipe, as no doubt ye are aware. In this Kirk, on the ither hand, a' we can afford is a ha'penny clay cutty once a session which the Meenister gradually eats. See!" He held the pipe out to her, stem first. "When I first got this pipe it was near enough four inches lang and look at it noo, near doon to the bowlie. Still an' all, it smokes, an' that's mair than the Auld Kirk billie can say o' his, for I've seen his Adam's apple churnin' at it, an' him sookin' like a calf." He turned the pipe in his hand, examining it. "Granted that I'm prejudiced. Ay, an' envious too. None the less, I contend that yon pipe is nae mair a Meerschaum than mine is. Na, na, it's just a bittie plaister o' Paris dressed up for show." He put the stump of pipe back into his mouth, drew largely and noisily to establish the fire, and leaned forward in sudden earnest. "Let's get till't. Nae equivocation and nae undue politeness. I had a veesit from Mistress Jannet Skene, the hin' end o' last week. D'ye ken fit she came to speak to me aboot?"

"No," Thirza said.

"I think ye've a good idea. She telt me ye were goin' to marry William Skene an' . . ."

"That's not true," Thirza said quickly.

"Well noo, she'll be interested to ken that. Ye see, she came to ask me—na, fegs, she came to tell me—that I wisna to allow this mockery o' a marriage. She used some vairry hard words, an' I could see she had ta'en the maitter to hairt. I'm sure she'll be vairry pleased to hear that ye're nae plannin' to mairry William efter a'."

"I didn't say that," Thirza said, crimson with embarrassment at the suddenness of this attack. "What I said—what I meant was that it wasn't true, as far as Mistress Skene knew, that I was going to marry Mr. Skene, because I haven't given him his answer yet. I haven't said definitely yet whether I'm going to marry him or not."

"And are ye?"

"I don't know for certain."

"We'll hae neen o' that," the Minister said. "Neen o' this equivocation. Nae *either ors*. Are ye, or are ye nae, aimin' to mairry William Skene?"

"I don't know."

"Ye ken fine. Are ye goin' to mairry him? Oot wi't."

"Yes."

"Well noo, lassie, look what a waste o' time. Hereafter speak the truth the first time, the hale truth, an' shame the de'il, and the Meenister forbye, if need be. But for mercy's sake let's hae only the truth. Why are ye for mairryin' William Skene?"

"Because he asked me to."

"That's nae answer. Suppose he had asked ye to jump aff a cliff. Try again. Why are ye for mairryin' him?"

"Because I want to."

"That's better. So ye want to be mistress o' a big hoose, eh? To hev a carriage maybe? To be kent as Mistress Skene and run accounts wi' the tradesmen? To be a hostess and entertain and send oot printed cairds wi' *Mr. and Mrs. Skene present their compliments to Provost and Mrs. Carnie blah blah et cetera blah,* ay, an' nae doot a monogram forbyes. Is that fit ye want, Thirza Gare?"

"No," Thirza said. The conversation had caught her unawares, bowled her along, unnoticing, past a dozen points of protest. Now

she took stock of what had been said and felt anger rise in her like steam. "No, Mr. Simpson," she said, eyes glittering, "that's certainly not what I want."

"Ah," said the Minister. "Good. Ye're gettin' mad noo because ye've heard a hometruth or twa. Come on noo, speak fair an' true. Why are ye mairryin' William Skene?"

She hesitated, torn between her genuine respect for the Minister and her bitter resentment of his words. She said helplessly, "I think . . . because I like him."

"Likin' an elderly man is nae guid reason for mairryin' him. D'ye realise that William Skene is nearly sixty years o' age? . . ."

"Fifty-three," she said.

"Fifty-eight, accordin' to my information."

"Fifty-three," she said. "He told me himself."

"Ah weel," the Minister said. "We winna argue aboot a mere five years. . . ."

"Yes, we will," Thirza said heatedly. "It's very important. Mr. Skene himself told me he was fifty-three, and that means he is fifty-three, and it is very wrong to try to make out that he is elderly when he is only a middle-aged man of fifty-three. And I don't understand why Mistress Skene should have gone to you at all, for Mr. Skene says that she has been wanting for some time to go and live with her sister in Aberdeen, and that the social life of Aberdeen will be very congenial to her."

"Hold hard!" the Minister said. "D'ye ken Mistress Skene, lassie?"

"I have met her."

"And d'ye really credit that a wifie like Mistress Skene is pinin' for the social life of a big bustlin' city like Aiberdeen?"

"That's what Mr. Skene said."

"Nivver heed fit Mr. Skene said. Mr. Skene is oot o' his mind and . . ."

"Mr. Simpson!"

"Dinna Mr. Simpson me. I said Mr. Skene is oot o' his mind, and I meant it. The man's daft, as a man o' his age aye is when he gets ideas o' the kind that Willie Skene has, and being daft, he's liable to say onything, leastwise, to you, and it looks like you're also daft enough to listen to him."

Thirza got to her feet in a tantrum. "I've heard enough, Mr. Simpson. . . ."

"Na, na, that you hinna, nae by a lang chalk. I'm your Meenister and hev been since ye were born, and ye'll answer on this maitter to me an' to your conscience afore you leave this vestry. I'm an aul' man and an offensive ene at that, an' it may be I've found it needs a vairry offensive aul' man to admeenister God's laws among His bairns. Noo sit down. Ye're in a holy place, and a' this rampagin' aboot and grindin' your teeth and standin' up and settin' doon is nae doot as unsettlin' to the Lord as it is to His humble servant. For mercy's sake *sit doon,* lassie!"

Still bridling, she sat down.

"Thirza," Whisky Johnny Simpson said, using an altogether different voice, "I ken ye better than ye think. I ken fine foo interested ye are in this curin' business. I ken that when ye say your prayers, instead o' prayin' for your immortal soul, ye pray that there'll be a good catch the morn's morn. Ay, an' worse. Ye pray that the Moray Frith boats'll come in empty. Ye'll nae try to deny it. Ay, and I ken mair. I ken that ye think you're fond o' William Skene."

She said suddenly, "I *am* fond of him, Mr. Simpson," and was surprised to hear herself saying it. She did not owe him the truth. She had not meant, and still did not mean, to open her heart to him. Nevertheless, her voice continued. "I'm very fond of him," she heard herself say. "I've never known anybody who is so much of a gentleman, or whom I like and respect so much, and I don't care what anybody says, even you; I am very proud he has asked me to marry him."

Whisky Johnny let a silence gather. He placed the tips of his fingers together, constructed a Gothic arch, and peered through at her with one blood-shot eye. "Thirza," he said. "Ye're eighteen, I think."

She nodded.

"And William Skene is . . ."

"Fifty-three."

"In his fifties, shall we say? When you are in your thirties and still a young woman, William'll be in his seventies. It's a solemn thought, is't nae? That's the first thing for ye to think aboot

Here's anither. Ye may think that your feelings for William Skene are suffeecient to justify your mairryin' him, but ye're young, lassie, ye dinna ken much aboot siccan things, ye've nivver gi'en the young men a chance—I'll warrant ye've nivver kissed a young man yet. Hev you?"

"Of course not."

"D'ye see fit I'm drivin' at? Ye've nae experience. Ye've nae means o' measurin' the strength o' the emotion you feel or think ye feel for William Skene. Ye owe it to yoursel' at least to gi'e the young men a chance afore ye settle on an aul' man."

"He's not an old man," Thirza said. "And anyway . . ." She wanted desperately to justify her point of view to the Minister: perhaps she wanted also to convince herself. . . . "I just don't feel the way that other girls feel about young men. I wish I could make you understand, Mr. Simpson. I don't want a silly young man for a husband who can't talk about anything but dancing and playing games and, well, and making love. I want a man like Mr. Skene whom I admire and respect and who respects me, who treats me, not just as a girl, but as a person, who will talk to me about the things that I am interested in and who will listen to what I have to say. Oh, I know the way people will talk. They'll talk the way you did just now when you said that I was marrying Mr. Skene for his house, for a carriage, for his money. They'll say that, and they'll call me all kinds of names, but they won't be true. I do love him better than anybody I know, and that's the honest truth, Mr. Simpson, and that is why I am going to marry him."

The Minister was watching her with a small sceptical smile. "It's nae a vairry romantic outlook," he said. "But go on, Thirza, go on."

She stared at him helplessly. "That's all. Except, no, this. You said romantic. Well, young men aren't romantic to me—that's what I've been saying to you all along—but Mr. Skene is. I wish I could explain. . . . Do you know that when Mr. Skene's father started Skene's there wasn't another curing business in the whole length of the south side of the Moray Frith? Skene's was the very first. And when Mr. Skene's father died and Mr. Skene took over the business in 1832 . . . do you know how many people were employed in the yard then? Five. And Mr. Skene has built up the business,

year by year, until it is what it is to-day. I wish I could show you the books to let you see how hard Mr. Skene has worked and how big a business it is nowadays. Listen, do you know how many people were employed last week, not counting fishermen? Eighty-four. And not only that . . . do you realise that Mr. Skene is known and trusted all along the Baltic from Kiel to Könisberg, and that even firms in Holland write asking for his advice about herring spawning and things like that? Why, he's an authority, he knows as much as anybody alive about the life of the herring. Man," she said, angry at the sceptical look which still lingered on in the Minister's face, "don't you see that he's the most romantic, the only romantic, man I have ever met! Can you possibly be surprised that I want to marry a man like Mr. Skene rather than some preen-heidit young man who hasn't an idea in his mind except, well, except the flesh. Are you honestly surprised?"

"Yes, I'm surprised," Whisky Johnny said, peering into the bowl of his pipe and then giving it an exploratory poke with his little finger. "Y' see, it seems to me, Thirza, that ene o' the finest things in life is the pheesical union o' a young couple. It's nae the hale of mairrage, guid keens, but it is a muckle pairt, and mairrage is sic a vairry deefficult proposition at the best o' times that if this important factor o' pheesical attraction is absent at the outset, it is nae likely, to say the least o't, that the mairrage will be a success or bring ony real happiness to the pairties consairned."

"That's all very well," Thirza said, blushing; "but it happens I don't feel that kind of physical attraction you speak about—not for anybody—and I never have."

"Aye, but you will, lassie, an' there's the rub."

"I don't think I ever will," Thirza said. "You see, Mr. Simpson, I'm just not that kind of person."

The Minister looked at her in amusement, his eyes travelling slowly over her, registering each physical characteristic which he thought significant: the high, prominent cheek-bones, the flaring nostrils, the wide red mouth, the notable conjunction between throat and breasts. . . .

He smiled wryly. "Lassie, ye're a gomeril. You jest dinna ken fit ye're talkin' aboot. Mistress Skene is of the opinion that ye're a—designin' hussy, I think were the words she used, but she's a'

wrang: ye're jist a muckle fule. A' richt, get up if ye must. I could talk masel' into a decline an' nae shift that stubborn mind o' yours a half-inch. Get up and awa wi' ye! But dinna forget that John Simpson warned ye—are ye listenin' to me?—and dinna forget to come to me wi' your troubles, for troubles ye'll hae in plenty. And, Thirza," he said, as she snatched angrily at the door-knob, "wi' regard to our friend Mistress Skene, it micht interest ye to ken that when she asked me to come and reason wi' ye, I telt her it was neither God's affair nor mine, and I telt her, forbyes, that in my conseedered opinion ye'd make a fine braw wife to William Skene, an' I still think so." He smiled broadly and engagingly. "So ye needna slam the door on me, lassie."

(3)

Thirza was married to William Skene some four months later, on January 7, 1861. The ceremony took place in the Free Kirk, was conducted by the Rev. John Simpson, and was attended, to the bridegroom's relief, by most of the persons to whom he had sent invitations. The attendance at the Reception and Wedding Breakfast in the White House was not so satisfactory, for though most of the men guests put in an appearance, many of their womenfolk did not, and accordingly there were many blank spaces at the three long tables in the dining-room, and such an unusual preponderance of black-coated backs that the cook, peering through a slit in the serving hatch, confided to the hired butler that it looked to her "mair like a frunial nor a weddin'."

Thirza noted the phenomenon, but was too excited and far too busy to ponder over it.

Her father and Mary Belle had come down from Portknockie, and she wanted to have a proper clake with them but couldn't, for Mr. Skene kept coming up to her with this person and that to whom she had to be introduced and to whom, of course, she had to be polite, although she couldn't be as polite as she would have liked, because she kept worrying about her father and her stepmother. She was painfully aware that whenever she turned away from them they drew themselves up, stiff as ling on a drying line, too embarrassed and uncomfortable in this assured middle-class gathering to speak even to each other. When she did have a minute

to spend with them, she was surprised and a little distressed to find how difficult it was to find a topic of conversation. She saw plainly that Mary Belle and her father were anxious to be friendly, but, no matter how hard she tried, she could not get them to talk. When she asked about their life in Portknockie they answered in monosyllables.

"It's a pity Mairget couldn't have been here," she said.

"Ay," her father agreed.

"I haven't heard from Mairget since she and her husband moved to Edinburgh. Have you heard from her lately, Father?"

"No."

"No letters?"

"Nae for a year or two syne."

"Still, everything will be all right, I'm sure, or you'd have heard."

Mary Belle couldn't think of anything to say because her mind was entirely occupied with her new dress, a creation in mauve georgette with tier upon tier of protuberant flowered flounces, which had looked very nice in the mirror at home, but which even Mary Belle knew to be vulgar here. Alexander Gare was quite as uncomfortable as his wife. He was wearing a suit which Thirza had not seen before, and which she presumed had belonged to Mary Belle's late husband. It was too short, and yet too large, having been made for a smaller, fatter man, and it hung unhappily on her father's lean frame, voluminously enveloping his body, but exposing so much of his extremities that, at a glance, he looked all wrists and ankles.

Whisky Johnny Simpson, seeing Thirza's predicament, joined the group and took charge of her father and stepmother, leaving Thirza free to attend to the guests, and, more important, to keep an eye on the Daft Dominie. It was only after a lengthy discussion that she had been able to persuade Mr. Skene and Manson (who had been consulted on all the wedding arrangements) to include the Dominie in the list of guests, and in order to get her way she had foolishly declared that she would be responsible for him and would guarantee his good behaviour. Within half an hour the Dominie was speaking Latin, loudly and monopolisingly, with his eyes aflame and a bottle-neck protruding from his hip pocket. She

had spoken to the footman in charge of the refreshments table, and the footman had taken the bottle from the Dominie and replaced it on the table, but the Dominie had merely taken another bottle when he had thought the footman wasn't watching. And after the footman had taken two bottles from the Dominie and the Dominie, not to be outdone, had taken his third bottle off the footman's table, the footman, a competent barman and a sincere and zealous man, came to Thirza and told her politely but firmly that the job was too much for him, and either he could attend to the guests or he could attend to the *gentleman*; no man on earth could do both.

Thirza knew when she was beaten. "All right," she said. "If it makes him happy, just let him keep it in his pocket. What sort of a bottle is it?"

"Whisky, ma'am."

"Well," she said, baffled, "at least don't let him drink straight out of the bottle. If you see him trying to drink out of the bottle, give him a glass." And, far from satisfied with her compromise, she crossed to her beckoning husband to be introduced to still another old fishing friend from "up the coast." She remembered very few of these old friends afterwards, for, with one eye on her father and the other on the Dominie, she found it impossible to focus her attention on the various pleasant but undistinguished gentlemen who pressed her hand, and who all said much the same pleasant and undistinguished things. Oddly enough, she remembered the ladies much better, and when, afterwards, she wondered why, she realised that it was, of course, because she had watched the ladies much more carefully. These ladies had needed watching.

It had been arranged that, at three o'clock, bride and bridegroom would slip away to set out on the first stage of their wedding tour. Before going upstairs to change her dress, Thirza called her father and stepmother aside to say good-bye. She hoped that her father might have an affectionate word for her and that Mary Belle might wish perhaps to give her some feminine advice. Neither was forthcoming. They shook her hand formally and in silence, but, at the last minute as she turned away, her father said awkwardly, "We wanted you to have something to spend," and thrust a small cylindrical package into her hand.

She opened the package when she reached her bedroom. It

contained no fewer than twenty golden sovereigns, a sum so vast and splendid that she was appalled, thinking of what so much money must mean in her father's life.

She counted the coins again. Yes, twenty.

It was unbelievable.

She stood bolt upright, staring blindly out of the window. Her heart ached with pride and sadness. Tears welled up in her eyes and flowed, unnoticed, down her cheeks. She forgot her dress. She forgot all about the tour and the coach that left the Square at 3.15. She stood, lost, at the window, her hands full of gold, blinded by tears, swept by intimate bitter-sweet memories of her father and mother, and of the childhood that was gone for ever.

Sounds in the courtyard below gradually penetrated and fixed her mind, and, dabbing her eyes with her wrists, she looked down to see a scuffling scrum of men at the door. As she watched, the familiar figure of the Daft Dominie rose from the group like a pancake tossed from a pan and descended head first into a rhododendron bush.

She smiled and shook her head in mild reproof. "Dominie, Dominie!" she said. She remembered her time-table then, and, sniffing her remaining tears away, turned to the aired clothes which lay ready for her on the bed.

(4)

The wedding tour was spent at Inverurie and was not an unqualified success. Inverurie was then a small agricultural town of some two thousand inhabitants, and it had nothing, not even a good hotel, to recommend it as a honeymoon resort. Mr. Skene had elected to go to Inverurie because he had relatives there, cousins, with whom he had business to discuss, and Thirza had been so thrilled at the thought of seeing another part of the world (Inverurie was more than thirty miles from Kaysie) that it had simply never occurred to her that there might be better places to spend one's honeymoon.

Installed in the *Station Arms* in two dingy rooms, with linoleum floors, hard beds, cane chairs, cracked wash-bowls, and distorting wardrobe mirrors, they had agreed that the food, at least, was wholesome, and that the inland Inverurie air made a nice change

from the bracing Kaysie air and would no doubt do them good; and, Mr. Skene having in one day completed his business, they settled down resolutely to enjoy the remaining nine days of their tour.

The weather unfortunately was bad. There was a snowstorm soon after their arrival, and just as they were getting accustomed to the idea of snow the wind dropped, the temperature rose, and the rain came. The streets were covered with a dirty grey slush which crept in through the seams of their goloshes and splashed their stockings. They did not have one good walking day, and in Inverurie there was nothing to do but walk. They wrapped up well and went to the station each morning to see the Aberdeen train puffing out, but even this novelty palled. Thirza bought clothes and some small gifts for the people at home, and they sat close up to the fire in the public room in the hotel and played cribbage and read journals and talked in desultory fashion with the other guests, Mr. and Mrs. Watt of Rothes, who were dull and elderly, and a commercial gentleman named Clements whom Mr. Skene suspected of being a Jew.

Despite the unpropitious circumstances of the tour, relations between the newly married couple were most cordial and pleasant. Each was anxious to please the other, and each was easily pleased. Mr. Skene gave Thirza a Wedgwood cameo of a cherub in flight, and Thirza bought Mr. Skene a three-guinea gold Albert watch-chain.

Mr. Skene proved a most discreet and thoughtful bridegroom, and the only criticism that could be levelled at him was that he was perhaps a trifle too determined not to impose himself upon his bride. It was not until the seventh evening, by which time Thirza had become inured to her solitary state and had substituted night-gown for nightdress—pink flannel for lace—that Mr. Skene brought himself to knock on her door, and then it was only to suggest that in view of the continuing inclement weather it might be advisable, might it not, to cancel the remainder of their tour and to return to Kaysie the following day, a suggestion with which Thirza enthusiastically agreed.

"But," she added, frowning, "will you still have to pay for the full ten days?"

"I don't know."

"I'd like to go home," she said, thinking aloud. "The only thing is, this is costing so much. It would be such a waste of money if they charged us for the other three days."

"Never mind the waste," said Mr. Skene, who was in an unaccustomed state of nerves. "In fact, damn the money!"

"Mr. Skene," she said, casting a glance along the corridor and knowing full well that she was being roguish, "if you are to *swear* like that, you really must come in and close the door."

(5)

In the morning as they went down the narrow stairway to breakfast Mr. Skene broached a subject which for weeks had been lurking in a corner of his mind. He addressed the back of Thirza's head. "Thirza," he said. "Don't you think now that . . . no, I don't mean that . . . I mean, well, now we're going back home, don't you think you ought to call me William?"

She stopped and turned to look at him, startled. "Oh yes," she said. "Yes. Yes, of course, Mr. Skene." And then, realising what she had said, she giggled, put her hand on the banister rail for support, and laughed quite uncontrollably. Mr. Skene blinked at her in astonishment, and then he too began to laugh.

They were still smiling and their eyes were unguarded as they passed through the frosted-glass doors into the dining-room. They looked for the first time what for the first time they were, a man and wife on their honeymoon.

CHAPTER XIII

(1)

THE NEW MRS. SKENE WAS not popular.

Her marriage had elevated her, willy-nilly, into the highest stratum of Kaysie society. The ladies in this top Kaysie layer were exclusive and proud of it, and they were not disposed to welcome into their midst a fortune-hunting chit of a fisher-girl who had had the gall to carry William Skene off, so to speak, from under their very noses. They were affronted, and made no secret of it. They disliked Thirza for a variety of reasons—because she was not one of them, because she was young and attractive, because she made them feel insecure. But they never mentioned these reasons. They found much better ones for disliking Mistress Skene. To begin with, she was not a lady. It wasn't the fact that she was poor. That wasn't at all what they meant. Goodness, there were plenty of honest poor, everybody surely knew that, and nobody in these enlightened days would ever criticise anybody for merely being poor; oh no, it wasn't that at all, it was—well, take that story about her dismissal from Carmichael House, for instance. I mean, nobody wanted to harp back unfairly, *but*—and then there had been that frightful man Stullen, nobody quite knew the details, nobody wanted to, it was enough just to know that there had been some sort of affair—and Mr. Donald, it was an open secret that young Donald was sweet on the girl, and everybody knew what young Donald was; well, I mean to say, it just wasn't good enough, not when you thought of Willie Skene, trusting her, not having any idea at all of the sort of thing that *some* women would stoop to.

It made them very angry when they thought of William Skene, and very sorry for him. Poor Willie, they said. Poor Willie had deserved the best, and look what he had got. They were sorry for her too, at first. They pitied her, they said. Just think of her in charge of that big house! Just think of *her* trying to be a lady, a

wife to a gentleman like William Skene! And, thinking of it, they pursed their lips and shook their heads in horror. They honestly pitied her. Honestly, they said.

At first nobody at all envied her, and nobody who was anybody even bothered to criticise, at least not much; they were all too busy pitying her. They looked down at her from their great height as ladies in the top layer and simply pitied her. It was a very comfortable and superior emotion.

But after they had paid their ceremonial calls and attended one of Thirza's supper or dinner parties at the White House, they abruptly ceased to pity the new Mistress Skene. They had underestimated her. Her domestic arrangements were better than their own, and her manners were impeccable: it was plain that she had every point of modern etiquette at her carefully tended finger-tips. They came away grudgingly surprised. There was now no question of pity. More primitive emotions came into play. . . .

The Fisherfolk, at the other end of the Kaysie society scale, were just as critical as were the ladies of the middle-class, although for different reasons. They did not fear Thirza. They envied her. They did not understand her—they never had understood her—and, envying her and not understanding her, they decided conveniently that they despised her; and when they talked of her, as they frequently did during the first months of her marriage, they spoke out of curling lips and pointed their criticism with malicious barbs.

"That ene, she'd a married a midden for the muck!"

"Ay, ay, a gowd key'll open ony lock," they said. "But it's when the door's bolted and the shutters is doon, that's when she's like to learn that siller's nae a'. When they're auld and cauld, Guid kens, they've ill to lie aside."

Thirza had a good idea of what was being said about her, but she did not worry unduly. She had always known that she was *different* from other people, and it was no new experience to feel that she was being talked about. She had grown used to being the subject of gossip. She just took it for granted that people always did say unkind things, and made the best of it. She genuinely tried to win over the wives of her husband's friends, but when she saw that they were not to be conciliated, she accepted the situation philosophically, and went on her way unconcerned, merely mark-

ing the more dangerous of her enemies and doing what she could to protect herself from them.

She set out to be so prodigiously correct that no one could find fault with her.

She studied household management with the assistance of Mrs. Beaton and the *Dictionary of Daily Wants,* and so chivvied her staff that even the indefatigable Manson protested that she was being run off her feet. She practised entrances and exits, conversation and facial expressions before the long Jacobean looking-glass (priceless possession) in her boudoir. She exercised herself daily in the dealing and shuffling of playing-cards, and she delved scientifically into the problems of short whist, loo, cribbage, and four-handed bezique. She planned her dinner-parties in detail, rehearsing the bright "spontaneous" remarks with which she would greet each guest as he (and more particularly she) arrived, and she decided in advance what subjects to discuss during the difficult half-hour before dinner. She knew almost to the minute at what time she would manipulate a lull in the conversation, and she knew exactly how she would look and sound as she turned with a winsome smile to the most formidable of the elderly females at the table to suggest that they leave the gentlemen to their port. She paid attention to her wardrobe, studying the correct fashions in the *Ladies' Gazette* and following them, though not too slavishly, as far as her ingenuity and her needlework would allow. She discreetly thinned the drawing-rooms, removing much of the furniture, including a monstrous claw and ball-fronted high chest of drawers, a girandole with fixtures for two dozen candles, the grosser family portraits, and the ugliest of the bric-à-brac (which she regarded as indigenous to Mistress Jannet Skene). She rescued some fine Chelsea and Sèvres vases from the depths of a display cabinet and filled them lavishly with flowers from the garden. She decreed that a section of the garden should be exclusively hers, and she arranged new plantings to ensure a plentiful supply of cut flowers for the house all through the year.

Meantime she continued to take a lively interest in the business, and she held Mr. Skene to his promise to keep her informed. Every evening he brought a satchel full of papers from the office, and sometimes he would send George, the office-boy, home during

the day with the latest despatch from the Baltic, or a more than usually interesting letter from the morning's mail, or some ledger, Government paper, or reference book which Thirza wanted for reasons of her own.

She had converted the sun-parlour into an office, and now sat at an escritoire very different from the whorled deal desk of her office days—a low drop-front of walnut and rosewood, inlaid with landscapes in coloured woods. Here she got what sun there was until the middle of the afternoon. Seated on the ribbon-backed arm-chair or at the Louis XVI window-seat with its exquisite covering of Beauvais tapestry, she looked out through the long windows of the sun parlour on to what she thought must surely be the finest view in the world. She commanded the Bay. She could follow its arms to their extremities, and within these arms she could watch all the comings and goings of ships and fishing-boats. She could observe the harbour and the harbour works and almost the whole of the Fishertown. If she cared to look through the big tripod telescope, she could even see the door of the house in which she was born, and when the woman who now lived in the house came to the door to empty her bucket or call her children, she could follow the movements of her body and tell the colour of her clothing. On a fine day she could see the hills of Caithness eighty miles away on the far side of the Frith, and, looking to the westward beyond the Fishertown and the White Rock, she saw distant headlands which jutted, one beyond the other, hazy-white in the sun, like a row of enormous pleats.

It was a beautiful view, but her interest in it was essentially practical. She watched the fishing fleet go out and noted where it fished, using the telescope to pick up the lights which showed as pin-points at the mastheads when the nets were out; and then, in the morning, she watched the fleet come in, singling out the Skene boats for special observation, and recognising each from an expert knowledge of its features—the size and cut of the jib, the rake of the stem or stern, even the length of the sprit. She estimated the catch by the trim of the boats, and often surprised her husband at breakfast by her accurate prophecies of the day's haul. She logged the arrival and departure of all ships, with notes of destinations and cargoes; and, twice daily, she studied sky, sea, wind, and her new

Aneroid barometer in order to develop a weather sense as good as her husband's, for William could smell wind and rain. She watched the coastguard station on the braehead for signals, and, indeed, kept abreast of every occurrence of interest in the harbour and the Fishertown; and she did all this in her spare time, in the moments when she raised her face briefly from her accounts ledger, or shuffled a pack of cards, or passed through the sun-parlour on her way to consult Manson on the evening's bill of fare, or stood at the window in her muff and tippet waiting for old Alicky Mac, coachman and gardener, to bring round the chaise which she had not been able to prevent William buying for her, and in which, dressed in the height of fashion but without ostentation, she now drove every fine afternoon.

For the time being she was too busy to continue her studies with the Daft Dominie, but she kept an eye on him. She sometimes drove out to the Suckie Moor of an afternoon, and then she would strip off her fine top clothes, put on an apron, and vigorously attack the dirt in the hovel, while Alicky Mac sat stiff as a ramrod in his driving seat, pretending not to notice that his mistress was plying a broom at the door or shaking a great cloud of dust from a mop. She gave the Dominie one of Mr. Skene's old suits, with the strictest orders not to sell it, and then, since the Dominie now had two suits, she was able, each time she called, to take one home to patch, clean, and press.

She liked to fancy that she had succeeded in changing the Dominie for the better, that he was cleaner and tidier and had more gumption than when she first took him in hand, but she knew very well that this was just a conceit: he was as dirty and irresponsible as ever; all she had managed to do was keep him from getting worse. She sometimes said that she did not know why she bothered her head with such a wally-draggled great gumph of a man, and she meant it, yet it never seriously occurred to her to break with him. No matter how irritating and tiresome the Dominie might be, he was still, oddly enough, her respected tutor; no matter how often he might break faith with her over the bottle, he was still her faithful friend.

She did not have so many faithful friends that she could afford to discard one. One day, as she drove back from the Suckie Moor,

she amused herself by counting her friends on her fingers. She was shocked to find that—apart, of course, from William—there were only four people in the world whom she felt she could really trust: Manson, the Dominie, Edith Gordon (with whom she had gone to school), and, last but by no means least, John MacPherson.

(2)

She had not noticed John MacPherson in the press of strangers at the wedding reception. In fact, she had not remembered that such a person as John MacPherson existed until William had mentioned his name shortly after their return from the wedding tour.

"I was wondering," William had said, broaching the subject diffidently, "about John MacPherson. You see, it's been the custom for a year or two back for John to come along on Tuesday and Saturday evenings, and I was wondering . . ."

"But of course he must come as usual," Thirza had said.

"You see, John is in lodgings, and I think he finds it very pleasant to visit a home. . . ."

"Please don't explain, William," she said. "My dear, I want you to have your friends to the house whenever you wish. I want everything to go on just as it always did. You do know that, don't you? I would hate you to alter a single thing just because of me."

"I think you'll like John," William said. "Yes, I'm sure you will. He's a very sound fellow."

"John MacPherson?" she said, screwing up her eyes. "Is that Honest John by any chance?"

"I believe they call him Honest John. He's Editor of the *Advertiser*. Remember, you met him at the wedding?"

"I don't remember," she said. "But I remember meeting him years ago when I was a child. I'm sure I shall like him, William."

And she did. She liked him very much indeed. At first she feared that he was going to be absurdly shy, for the first evening he came to the house he would barely look at her. He sat stiffly in the hard Queen Anne walnut arm-chair, the most elegant but by far the most uncomfortable chair in the upstairs drawing-room, and glared at his scrubbed hands and pushed embarrassedly at his unruly brown hair and answered her so gruffly and so guardedly that she was quite dismayed and almost certain that he did not like her.

After a little she put away the flower that she was waxing and crept out of the room to leave the two men to their pipes and their talk. When she came back with a supper tray three-quarters of an hour later, they were talking of the American civil war, and John MacPherson was holding forth heatedly against Palmerston for ever having let the *Alabama* sail. She barely spoke for the rest of the evening. She sat listening intently. When either of the men looked at her she nodded and smiled in an easy, friendly way. She was out to gain John MacPherson's confidence, and so she stalked him as warily as if he had been a wild creature, veiling her personality so as not to alarm him, content that he should think of her merely as a pretty and pleasant little thing. When he rose to go she ventured to ask if he remembered the first time they met.

"Of course I do," he said, smiling. "It was when you brought me a letter, wasn't it?"

"When I brought you a letter to *write*," she corrected.

"About dogs, wasn't it?"

"About Davy," she said. "Poor Davy. I've always been so grateful to you. It was a wonderful letter."

"It wasn't bad for an eleven-year-old," John MacPherson said, smiling.

As they stood in the hall, laughing, together telling William the story, it occurred to Thirza that this was one of the pleasantest moments since her marriage. She felt that she already liked and respected John as much as William did, and she thought it would be splendid if she too could gain John MacPherson's friendship and join as an equal in these fascinating evening talks. She had never in her life heard anyone talk as John MacPherson had talked to-night. William, too, had been lifted right out of himself; he was usually quiet and deliberate, he used words sparingly and precisely, he stated facts and concealed himself behind them. But to-night, fired by John MacPherson, he had spoken fluently and sometimes passionately, he had used fat and colourful words, he had raked out a corner of his mind and exposed an aspect of his personality which she had not known existed. She had never liked him better, and she felt very grateful to John MacPherson for having shown her this new side of her husband.

She said, "You'll be sure to come again on Tuesday?"

"I'm afraid I can't manage Tuesday."

"But William says you always come on Tuesdays."

"This Tuesday I have a meeting."

She bit her lip, disappointed, feeling that his meeting was only an excuse, that it was really because of her that he did not mean to come.

"Saturday then," William said.

She saw John MacPherson's questioning glance, and she said emphatically: "Of course he'll come on Saturday. You will, won't you, Mr. MacPherson? You must come just as you always did. I should be very disappointed if I thought that you were staying away because of me. It would make me most unhappy to feel that I was spoiling one of William's pleasures."

William put a hand on her shoulder. It was a thing which he had never done before, and a thing which he probably would not have done in front of anyone but John MacPherson; it embarrassed and pleased her, and she turned her face to him, flushed and smiling.

"Thirza is a remarkable wife," William said playfully. "She doesn't want to change anything about me."

"Really?"

"Nothing," she said, and, sensitive to a faint movement in John MacPherson's eyes, she thought guiltily of the changes she had made in the house, of the clutter of hall ornaments that she had sent only that morning to the garret. "Nothing that matters," she added. "Only things. I don't want William to alter his ways of living at all, and especially I don't want his friends to alter because of me. I really mean that. I hope you'll come to the house just as often as ever you can, Mr. MacPherson."

"I certainly shall, Mrs. Skene," he said. "Be glad to."

"And I think," she said, smiling, "that you really should come on Tuesday. After your meeting."

Their eyes met, and in that moment she knew intuitively that she had made a friend. She found herself blushing. She was very pleased.

CHAPTER XIV

(1)

WILLIAM'S HEALTH WAS A CONSTANT worry. During that first winter he was reasonably well. He was confined to bed only twice, each time for a period of four or five days, and each time with what she thought was no more than a common cold. She hoped that the fine weather would set him up, but it didn't. He went on coughing through the spring and summer; and in the middle of August, a glorious August of long, tapering, sunlit days—the sort of weather in which there was no excuse for anybody to be ill—he ruptured a blood-vessel in his lungs with coughing, and had to stay in bed for a fortnight. When he got up he said he was a great deal better and that the loss of blood had done him good. Thirza doubted it, for he had lost weight as well as blood, and he did not look strong. He had never been fat, and it seemed to her now, watching him uneasily, that his neck was too small for his collars and that he was shrivelling up inside his clothes. He slept badly. Sometimes she suspected that he had not slept at all, but when she asked he always assured her that he had had a good night. He rarely complained, and she saw that he did not like her to make any comment on the mornings when he came down to breakfast with his cheeks a more than usually delicate colour and his eyes unnaturally bright. She had no confidence in old Dr. Grant, and she tried to persuade William to have a doctor out from Aberdeen, but William would not hear of it. He had consulted a specialist some years ago, and he saw no sense, he said, in paying a large fee to be told what he already knew. Thirza did all she could to ensure his well-being. She made a study of invalid dieting, and served him only the tastiest and most nutritious foods. She kept up big fires in the living-rooms, sealed and screened off all draught holes. She put him into a chest comforter, aired and heated his clothes daily, encouraged him to go early to bed, and made him a brandy toddy every night to help him sleep.

In this way, thinking always of what was best for William and taking the greatest care of him, she brought him through the autumn and the severest part of the winter without a single day's real illness; and then, towards the end of February, just as the days were beginning to lengthen and as the hard earth was cracking from the thrust of the new year's shoots, William caught the first of a crop of colds which kept him first in bed and then indoors for the better part of six weeks, and which left him with a hacking cough and a tendency during all that spring and summer to catch a new cold off anybody who had one.

(2)

As a result of William's illness, Thirza inevitably found herself gaining control of the business. At first she acted only as an agent for William, consulting him on all problems and carrying out his instructions to the letter, but later there were times, which became more frequent as she became more confident, when she thought it better not to tire him with details, and then she would take the responsibility of making decisions of her own. It gave her a heady excitement to gather the threads of the business, one by one, into her hands, to sit at her desk in the sun-room savouring the knowledge that for the time being she, Thirza Gare, Mrs. Skene, was head of this important organisation. It was fascinating to think that by a mere stroke of her pen she could send a ship across the North Sea or start a project which in one way or another would affect the lives of hundreds of men and women. When she sat with a sheaf of papers before her, deliberating on her yea or nay, she sometimes felt exultation rise in her like a blare of trumpets. In her mind's eye she saw not only the problem, but herself considering the problem. She loved her new sense of power, but was careful to conceal her feelings. No one, looking at her signature, would ever guess how exuberantly she had made it. She signed herself in a small hand, without flourishes, and deliberately forbore to underline her name.

In her new position she had a new, comprehensive view of the business, and she was appalled at the number of flaws she found in the administration. She began quietly and very gradually to eradicate them. Once, tightening up a fisherman's contract, she inserted

a clause which she knew William would not like, and although she felt guilty about this, she nevertheless inserted the self-same clause in another fisherman's agreement a few weeks later. She had no difficulty in justifying herself. After all, you had to be business-like in business. It was a thing which William had never fully realised. He was altogether too casual, far too inclined to clinch his deals by verbal agreement, to trust a man because he had known and trusted his father, to consider his profits only in terms of pounds and to leave shillings and pence to his customers.

There were times when she had to admit to herself that she quite lost patience with William.

It was infuriating, for instance, to see how much more interested he was in politics than in business. He would argue for hours with John MacPherson on such subjects as the Trent Incident, the latest brush between Palmerston and Cobden, the Revised Code of Education, and so on, but try to get him to give an opinion on something that really mattered, like the growing encroachment of the Moray Frith Curing Company on Skene's terrain or the poor price that the Hamburg agent had got for the last consignment of Crown-branded fulls, and he would dismiss the subject in a word or two, without ever applying his mind to it at all.

Meantime, while William fiddled with his politics, cluttering up his mind with arguments against the slave-owners in the American Confederacy and wasting valuable time in helping John draft a series of leaders against the die-hards on the Town Council, the biggest reactionary of them all, Richard Carmichael, was calmly filching William's business away from under his very nose. It exasperated Thirza that William could not, or would not, see that his first duty was to himself, and that Richard Carmichael was the arch-protagonist of all the things that William hated most. If only William would concentrate all his resources on the struggle against Richard Carmichael, surely he would be fighting oppression and privilege much more effectively than by merely bandying words with John MacPherson?

William couldn't see it.

"Carmichael is just an individual," he said. "It's the principles that count. The individuals don't matter, Thirza. Destroy the principles, and you sweep away all the individuals who live and prosper

by these principles. But the principles come first. They are the root of the evil, m'dear."

"All right, William," she said patiently. "Let's suppose they are. Suppose you have a tree in the garden, and suppose, for the sake of argument, that it's a diseased tree. Now, suppose this diseased tree pushes out a branch against your window. You don't bother about the roots, do you, however diseased they may be? At least, not immediately. You cut off the branch. I tell you, William, if we don't start fighting Carmichael soon, it'll be too late. We'll have nothing left to fight with."

"Oh, come now, you're exaggerating."

She sometimes wondered if she did exaggerate the Carmichael menace. She thought of Richard Carmichael as a great octopus, spreading his tentacles around the town, encircling great chunks of land and property, sucking in the public utilities—the bank, the hotel, the gasworks, the sawmill, the ropery, the public conveyances —inexorably squeezing the little man out of business, stifling progress and enterprise and pride. Did she exaggerate? Did she credit Richard Carmichael with a power and a malignity which he did not possess? She simply did not know.

"He's out to destroy us, William," she said.

"That's nonsense," William said briskly. "Naturally, there's a certain amount of business rivalry between the Moray Frith and ourselves, and we aren't just on the best of terms, but Carmichael is no more out to destroy us than we are to destroy him. Where's that magazine of mine?"

It was exasperating to be treated like a child, to have your warnings brushed aside as prattle when you knew that this was a matter of life and death.

"What about the time the brand was refused?" she demanded. "Was that just ordinary business rivalry?"

"We don't know that Carmichael had anything to do with that."

"Don't we, William?"

"Well, we can't be sure," he said uneasily; "and, personally, I have the greatest difficulty in believing that Carmichael, for all his faults, could ever identify himself with anything criminal."

"That's because you're a gentleman, William."

"I'm a businessman."

"No, William," she said, shaking her head. "A businessman is precisely what you are not. You're a gentleman and an idealist, and you credit everyone else with your own ideals and your own sense of honour, and that's where you make a great mistake. Richard Carmichael is the sort of man you'll never understand, not in a hundred years, and it's plain as a pikestaff to everyone except yourself that Richard Carmichael is out to destroy Skene's, and he'll do it too, unless you stir yourself and start fighting back."

"Well," William said, "I am taking precautions, you know. That night watchman. . . ."

"Night watchmen can be bribed."

"Good gracious, Thirza!" He was genuinely shocked. "That sort of thing doesn't happen in Kaysie. Really, m'dear, I think you're taking a very melodramatic view of this whole business. Where's that *Blackwood's* I was reading?"

"It's behind you on the table," Thirza said. Tears spurted unexpectedly in her eyes and she breathed hard, biting her lip. "Why do you always refuse to look the truth in the face, William? All this trouble we've had with our fishermen this year—who's doing do you think that is if not Carmichael's? And the trouble with the Fishery Officer? And all these rumours? . . ."

"My dear!" William said. He laid his journal on his knees, and, smiling, held out a hand to her, but she would not have his hand, and she would not be wheedled from her point.

"It's *serious*," she persisted.

"It's not nearly so serious as you appear to think," William said reassuringly. "I've been in business for a good many years now, and I know that these ups and downs, these unfortunate little incidents, are part of the pattern of business life. I've had this sort of trouble before—rival firms bribing my fishermen away with big money—but I've managed to get other fishermen, and, when the need arose, other boats. This is just a phase, Thirza, and has to be regarded as such. Watched. Watched carefully, if you like. But not taken too much to heart. These difficult times will pass."

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course, my dear. They always do."

She looked down at her hands, vexed. It had been like this every time she had ever tried to rouse William to a sense of his danger:

he merely pooh-poohed her warnings away and sought refuge in some comforting platitude. "You're losing your best fishermen," she said deliberately, "one after the other. They're all signing for the Moray Frith. I heard to-day that Doddie Mair's to be the next."

"Doddie Mair!" William said sharply, stung to attention, as she had known he would be. "Who told you that?"

"They were speaking about it down at the office. No one knows anything definite yet, but Doddie asked for a copy of his contract last week, and Mr. Donald saw him a couple of nights ago with the Moray Frith runner. They were talking together in the *Black Bull,* and Mr. Donald says they were thick as thieves."

"Doddie Mair!" William said closely. "Well, I just won't believe that Doddie would leave me until I hear it from his own lips. Why, I had Doddie's father. Ay, and his grandfather too. I've had Doddie himself since he was a laddie. It was I who set him up with his first boat, and I've financed him and his through many of the bad years. I must have had Doddie on my books for nearly forty years."

"Thirty-six years, to be exact," Thirza said. "But I'll warrant you won't have him for much longer, William—nor any of the rest of the best of your fishermen—that is, unless you start fighting for them."

"How?" William said. He looked old and tired and worried. The journal slipped from his knee, and he did not pick it up. He smoothed his hair back and sighed. "Just how would you propose fighting, Thirza?"

"I don't know offhand, but there must be ways."

"There are many ways," William agreed, staring thoughtfully into the fire, "and I think that at one time or another I have considered them all. I could amend the fishermen's contracts, for instance. It would be quite easy in a bad year to get them to sign on for ten, or even fifteen years. I could offer inducements—new boats at catch prices, free whisky, substantial bonuses. I might even go behind the Moray Frith's back as the Moray Frith is now going behind mine. I might offer terms to *their* fishermen. I could exist, if need be, for a year or two without profits. I could manage to pay —not just to offer: genuinely to pay—even a higher wage than the uneconomic wage the Moray Frith is now offering, that is, if I were

content to run my business at a loss and to concentrate only on putting my rivals out of business. I could do all that, Thirza," he said. "Ay, and more. I could, I believe, make it very uncomfortable for Mr. Carmichael and all the other gentlemen who are financially interested in the Moray Frith."

"I know you could," she said, leaning forward, her eyes shining with excitement. This was what she had been hoping for. This was what she had waited months to hear. "I know you could, William."

"But I won't. And I won't, because the game isn't worth the candle, Thirza. One doesn't want to talk about such things, nevertheless, it's a fact that in all the years that Skene's has been in business we've always been motivated, first and foremost, by the thought of what is best for the community as a whole—for our fishermen and their wives and families, for our sailmakers and our coopers and our office folk and our gutters, for the whole Fishertown." He smiled wearily and shook his head. "I've seen firms come and go, Thirza, including big mushroom firms like the Moray Frith, firms far bigger and richer than Skene's. I've seen them trying to squeeze us out before by unfair business methods. I've seen them at their dirty games, gambling with fishermen's lives for their profits. Ay, I've seen them get their profits too. But the losses came in the profits' wake, as the losses always do, and after a couple of bad seasons these big new rich firms have gone to the wall, one after the other, and to-day nobody even remembers their names. I know you're worried about the Moray Frith, Thirza; I've watched you growing more and more uneasy, and I haven't missed the fact that you've been dinning fight and fighting words into my old ear for the past few months, but don't fret yourself on that score, my dear. I'll fight. I'll fight the Moray Frith and beat them, but not with their weapons—with my own, with the same weapons that I've fought every other firm that has tried to establish a monopoly on the coast—fair dealings with my own workpeople, good workmanship, and honesty abroad. Would you seriously have me do otherwise?"

"I don't know," Thirza said, and having said it, could not meet his eyes. She blushed and looked at her hands. She arranged them in her lap. "I do know, William," she said quickly. "Of course, I wouldn't have you do otherwise. Yours is the right way."

He picked up his journal, smoothed it on his knee. "I don't like your news about Doddie Mair, but still"—he was smiling now, relaxed, confident—"don't worry about it, Thirza. Skene's won't go under. Skene's never does. Is that the door bell?"

"It's probably John." She walked across the room, hesitated at the door, turned back impulsively, and slipped her arm for a moment round William's shoulders. "Of course Skene's won't go under," she said. She felt very proud of him, very proud of Skene's, and thoroughly ashamed of herself. Yet, only an hour later, as she went downstairs to fetch William's toddy, she became aware that William's fine words had failed to convince her of anything save what she had already known, that he was far too much of an idealist. She came to a stop at the foot of the stairs and stood looking back, frowning. She jabbed peevishly at the banister rail with her clenched fist. "He just doesn't understand business," she said. "And he never will."

(3)

During the weeks that William was confined to the house John MacPherson was a constant visitor, and a welcome one, despite the fact that his talk was almost exclusively of the Schleswig-Holstein question and the possibility of war. Not war between Denmark and the Germanic Confederation—that now seemed certain—but a European war in which Austria and Prussia would support the German Powers, and Britain and France would align themselves with Denmark. Palmerston had stated a few months ago that in the event of a violation of the Treaty of London, Denmark would not find herself alone, and now, as Frederick of Augustenberg openly mobilised the Saxons and Hanoverians, and as the Danes worked feverishly at their impregnable frontier line, the Dannewerk, large, ominous headlines disfigured the Presses of Europe, and speculation and rumour swirled across the nervous Continent.

Thirza did not pay much attention to the men's talk. She was not interested in wars. All she knew about the last war was that it had taken place a long way off in a place called the Crimea, that a Kaysie youth had run off to become a drummer boy and had never come back, that her mother had knitted a pair of black stockings for the Gordon Highlanders, and that the Provost had lit a bonfire

on the braehead to celebrate the victory. She felt that wars were not women's concern and, in addition, that they were generally dull affairs; and so, while the men argued about Bismarck's designs and the strategic importance of the River Lieber, their voices booming like distant guns, she bent her head over her embroidery and applied her mind to her own important problems.

At first she was able to ignore all thought of war by simply closing her mind to it, but one evening some echo of the men's talk lingered in her memory, and she found herself visualising the map of Europe. She said idly, "William, if there's a war, will our Baltic markets be affected?"

"Oh yes," William said.

She dropped her work in her lap and looked at him in sudden anxiety. She realised then for the first time that this war, if it came, might be more than just another international disaster: it might cost Skene's money. "Gravely affected?" she enquired.

"They might be closed to us," William said.

"That would be serious, wouldn't it?"

"Very serious."

"Would it ruin us?"

"It would depend how long the war lasted."

She considered that, making due allowance for William's habit of under-statement. "William, do you really think there's going to be a war?"

"I don't know, my dear. As far as I can make out the German States are almost certain to attack Denmark, and Denmark most certainly will resist, but what will happen after that—whether Austria and Prussia will march as well and whether we'll get involved—well, that's something that neither I nor anybody else can tell."

"But what do you *think*?"

"I think we ought to fight," William said. "I think the least we can do is to go to Denmark's aid if she's attacked."

She bit her lip. "And what does John think?"

"John thinks we should fight too, but he is afraid that the Government will back out of it at the last moment. He doesn't think we'll go to war over Denmark."

"I don't think so either," she said emphatically.

William gave her a gentle, ironical smile. "That's reassuring," he said gravely.

From then on she took the closest interest in the international situation, reading every word that John MacPherson printed on the subject in the *Kaysie Advertiser,* and even studying the despatches of W. H. Russell in *The Times* which William received, three days late, from London. She had the unreasonable feeling that this international crisis had crept up on her like a thief in the night, and that if she had been aware of it earlier she would surely have been able to do something to check it.

(4)

Despite her many preoccupations, she was happy that summer and autumn. She had settled down to married life. She felt at home in the White House, and she now heard herself addressed as Mistress Skene without ever batting an eyelid. She did not make new friends, but she did not feel the lack of them. One good friend like John MacPherson was worth a dozen in the ordinary sense of the word. The better she got to know John—and during William's illness she got to know him very well indeed—the more she came to admire him. She thought of him as a treasured elder brother, giving him the place in her affections which had once belonged to her brother Andra. As for William—one evening, as they talked together of John, he said candidly that he sometimes thought of John as the son he might have had.

"Might still have," said Thirza, perched on the arm of his chair.

"Eh what!" William's surprise was comical. He swung round to stare at her, his mouth open, his eyes popping.

"No," she said, laughing. "No no, William, not yet. But you might have a son some day, you know."

"It's not a thing to talk of lightly," William said in his most disapproving voice. "In fact, it's not a thing to talk of at all."

"Oh tush!" she said, but, seeing him flush and knowing her husband's foibles only too well by this time, she quickly changed the subject. "I wonder why it is that John has never married, William?"

"Perhaps because he's never found a woman good enough for him."

"I don't think there's a woman living good enough for John," she said. "But all the same, it's queer he hasn't married. He must be getting quite old. He must be over thirty, isn't he, William?"

"I think he's almost thirty-two," William said. "But it's not so queer really, Thirza, if you think about it. He's never had anything much to do with the opposite sex, and I don't suppose he ever will have. He's far too shy."

"He's not shy with me."

"No," William admitted. "But that's different."

She didn't see why, but she let that pass.

"It's his leg," William explained.

She was shocked and incredulous. She hardly ever noticed John's paralysed leg, and she did not think that anyone else did either. "But one never thinks about it," she said after a long pause.

"You and I don't," William agreed. "But John does. He's very sensitive about that leg of his."

William was right, of course. She paid attention from then on, and saw that John was always aware of his crippled leg, always going out of his way to prove to an unnoticing world that it was no disability to be a cripple. He shook his bad leg in your face, so to speak, and boasted, though not in words, that it was as good as either of yours. She was deeply moved when she realised how self-conscious and unhappy he must be, and from then on her affection for John became tinged with tenderness. She wanted to speak to him quite frankly about his leg, to assure him that no one but himself ever thought about it or even noticed it. She was sure that she could help him by bringing the subject into the open and talking about it in a perfectly ordinary and sensible way, but when she suggested this to William he disagreed entirely and forbade her, on pain of his most severe displeasure, to mention the crippled leg to John. "It's his own affair," William said. "If he wants to talk about it, let him bring up the topic himself. It would be most improper of us to mention it, and it would be particularly improper of you, of course, to refer to it in any way whatsoever."

"And why would it be particularly improper of me?" she wanted to know.

"Because you're a woman," William said, wearily stating the

obvious. "And naturally this is a matter on which there can be no discussion between the sexes."

This was the sort of subject on which they came nearest to quarrelling. When they were first married it had disappointed her bitterly to find this prudish streak in William. On all other matters he was tolerant and broad-minded, but where the relationship between the sexes was concerned, his mind was rigidly and puritanically set. He had some very old-fashioned notions. He had even taken exception to the lace which Manson and she had laboriously sewn on to her trouseau underclothes.

"I am of the opinion," he had said, "that the less trimming there is on underlinen the more ladylike it appears."

"William," she said, cross. "I have probably more experience of such matters than you, and I can assure you that ladies of every degree wear trimmings on their undergarments, and the greater the lady the more the trimmings. You should see some of Mistress Carmichael's chemises and nightgowns. . . ."

He had blushed furiously, but despite his embarrassment, he had managed to have the last word.

"Mistress Carmichael is not Mistress Skene," he had said.

That was the first of their disagreements, and it had hurt and disappointed her. It had also angered her, and she had smouldered for a week, deliberately flaunting her lace underclothes at him. Then, in a flush of repentance, she sat down one evening and snipped every scrap of lace off everything, but she could not help thinking later that William was neither as pleased nor as grateful as he ought to have been.

That same week he had taken exception to her habit of jumping on to the high bed. He made a long preamble of it and chose his words with delicacy, but all the delicacy in the world could not disguise the fact that he thought her jumping savoured of animal spirits and of an unbecoming eagerness. It was not a ladylike act. "After all, Thirza," he said, "the steps are there to be used."

Then *in* the bed there had been one difficulty after another. The bed curtains had to be hermetically sealed so that no flicker of light from the fire could possibly reveal them to each other; there had to be only the most conventional of endearments and a minimum of sound; and, all in all, the proceedings had to be conducted in a

civilised manner, with William exercising the restraint fitting in an elder of the Kirk and Thirza acting with as much dignity and poise as though she were serving him a nice cup of tea in the drawing-room.

It was all very trying to a normal and healthy girl like Thirza, yet after a little she got so used to William's primnesses that she came to regard them as not only right but normal. She wished sometimes, with vague regret, that he was a little more reasonable over such matters as, for example, John MacPherson's leg, and she would have liked to have had his opinion on some of the perplexing problems of sex, but she was anxious to be a dutiful and obedient wife, and therefore, even when she was quite sure that William's attitude was wrong, narrow, and downright silly, she nobly forbore to point this out. On the practical side, she had no standard of comparison and no complaints. She regarded William as a competent lover, and accepted his advances with tolerance and, occasionally, with pleasure. She was as happy in this as in all the other aspects of her marriage. She never had any doubt that it was an unqualified success.

CHAPTER XV

(1)

THE WAR BROKE OUT ON Christmas Eve, 1863. Saxons and Hanoverians, with their colours up and their bands playing, marched into Holstein, and made a Christmas present of the liberated Duchy to the Duke of Augustenberg. The Danes strategically withdrew. The Emperor of Austria and the King of Prussia, uneasily united, turned the impregnable Dannewerk by the simple expedient of sending their powerful armies across the Schlei. The Danes again withdrew. The occupation of Schleswig-Holstein, and, for good measure, part of Denmark was thus achieved at the cost of only a few skirmishes, and there was a general feeling in Europe that, if this was all there was to it, it had been a particularly neat and tidy war.

This was not all. While the Great Powers parleyed interminably in London and the German armies sat fat and fraternal on their doorstep, the Danes went on fighting all spring and summer in the only way they could. They instituted a blockade of the Baltic.

In the normal course of events the Royal Navy would have been used to break the blockade, for business was business and Britain did a roaring trade along the Baltic. But the circumstances were peculiar. Britain's sympathies were with Denmark, and it was unthinkable that the British Navy should be employed against the gallant little Danes, whose only crime had been to believe in the injudicious promises of Her Majesty's Government. It was equally out of the question, however, that the Danes or anyone else should be allowed to interfere with Britain's shipping, and so the British Government decided on a compromise which would cost the country trade, but which would save the embarrassment of international incidents: money for face: a reasonable bargain. They closed the Baltic to British shipping. They issued an order that no British merchant ship was to enter the Baltic, and that any British ship attempting to run the blockade would do so without the

protection of the British flag. The sting of the order lay in its tail. If a ship was intercepted in the Baltic, it would be confiscated along with its cargo, and, in addition, its owners and master would be liable for heavy penalties in the British Courts.

The news of this order sent a shudder of apprehension through the Scottish herring industry. Meetings of protest were immediately convened all along the Moray Frith, and indignant memorials, complete with thousands of signatures, were addressed to the Prime Minister, to the Foreign Minister, and to Her Majesty the Queen, who, if rumour was correct, had herself opposed the order on the grounds that poor Albert, a German, would not have liked it.

The moral question of blockade was debated from piers to pulpits, and there was pious indignation all along the Scottish seaboard that innocent women and children should be deprived of food, and, in particular, of the nutritious Scotch herring. All sorts of plans were set on foot to evade the blockade, but out of all these rebellious plans, out of all this anger and agitation and defiance, there emerged precisely nothing, for larger issues than the markets of the herring industry were at stake, and the Government was determined not to budge from its position. When the screen of words had ceased to obscure the issue, it became clear to the curers that, however much they might dislike the new regulation, they had no choice but to lump it. They were at the mercy, not only of the Government, but of the shipping companies, and the shipping companies would take no risks; they would have no truck now with the Scotch herring. An association of curers, greatly daring, bought and fitted out an Aberdeen brig and despatched her with a large cargo of earlies for Stettin, but she was intercepted in the Skaggerak and escorted, under arrest, to Tilbury; and the five curers who had sent her off, not only lost ship and cargo, but were so heavily fined that three of them went bankrupt. The herring industry gave up. There was nothing for it but to grin and bear it, cut down costs to a minimum, and hope that the Great Powers would reach agreement and force a peace upon Denmark in time to save the autumn market.

(2)

Thirza had her hands full. Like all the other curers, she was busy taking what small steps she could to put pressure on the Govern-

ment, and at the same time, by reorganisation and retrenchment, to minimise the effects of the loss of the Baltic markets. She was making prodigious efforts to extend Skene's sales in Ireland, and she was also cautiously exploring the possibility of sending consignments to the Mediterranean countries, the West Indies, and Australia. She had not only the problems of the war to cope with but, much worse, the problems of her own private war with the directors of the Moray Frith Curing Company, who, in the past few months of William's illness, had cast subterfuge to the winds and were now fighting Skene's in the open, pushing preposterously for business while everyone else retrenched, publicly offering contracts to Skene's fishermen and approaching Skene's overseas contacts, both agents and consignees, with offers which were very hard to refuse.

The bitterest blow of all fell in the last week in June, when the Current Account Ledger mysteriously disappeared from the office, and as mysteriously reappeared forty-eight hours later in a corner of Mr. Mortimer's desk. There could be no doubt that someone in the office was implicated, and as Thirza questioned the staff, searching each face vainly for some tell-tale sign of guilt, she was overcome by a sense of her own inadequacy and could have wept from sheer frustration. What chance had she against the Moray Frith abroad when they could even cock a snook with impunity at her in her own office?

Overnight, the atmosphere in the office became sullen and hostile, with everyone now watching everyone else, and Thirza, with the new worry of a spy in the office to add to her old worries about William's health and the war situation and the dwindling business, became daily more strained and irritable. Mortimer began to get increasingly on her nerves. She could have screamed each time she saw him search for his snuff-box, and when, in answer to a simple query, he launched out on one of his long voyages of circumlocution, it was all she could do to keep from discharging him on the spot. She would have dearly liked to get rid of him. The slightest changes in office routine shocked and bewildered him, and even when she gave him a direct order he was liable to disobey, explaining afterwards with ponderous condescension that what he had done was what he had always done, and that that was the way that *Mr*. Skene liked it. She felt that she could not begin to make Skene's

truly efficient until she had got rid of Mortimer, and one evening, after a particularly trying day in the office, she put the suggestion to William that it was time that the head clerk was retired.

William would not hear of it. "No no," he said. "Mortimer's all right. A bit absent-minded at times perhaps. But he knows my ways. He ought to. He's been in that office for as long as I can remember."

"That's precisely it," she said. "He's been there too long, William. He's not fit for the work any more."

"Oh, I don't know," William argued. "He doesn't complain."

She looked at him in some exasperation.

"After all," he said, "it would kill the poor old chap if we retired him now. No no, let him stay in harness as long as he's fit to hobble to the office."

"You know what that means, don't you? We'll probably lose our Accounts Ledger to the Moray Frith every year."

"Well," William said mildly, "let's lose it. What's so important about it, anyway?"

She did not pursue the subject. She had the feeling that no matter how convincingly she argued, she would not persuade him to her point of view. She had learned that William could be very stubborn, especially on a matter of sentiment, and she knew from his manner that this was one of the times when his mind was quite made up. Mortimer was to stay.

(3)

Some days later she saw her first real chance to strike a blow for Skene's. She did not go to the office that morning, but sat till eleven o'clock at her desk in the sun-room planning her coup in detail, revising each step in its progression, and weighing the risks until she was satisfied that the venture had a reasonable chance of success and that her plans could not be much improved upon.

At eleven o'clock she sent for Mr. Donald. She made a gracious and incongruous picture as she sat among all the paraphernalia of men's work at a desk piled high with papers. She was wearing a new white silk blouse with bishop sleeves, a shawl of black Maltese lace, and a fashionable rose and heliotrope parure. But, for the time being, she was not concerned with her appearance, and she did not

even notice its effect upon Mr. Donald. She bade him take a chair, and, having got him seated, subjected him to a long, close scrutiny. "Mr. Donald," she said briskly, "can I trust you?"

"I think so, ma'am."

"That's not enough. I want to know for certain."

"Well then, ma'am, you can trust me," Mr. Donald said. He looked into the sun, into what he could see of her face. "I didn't take the ledger if that's what you mean," he said bluntly.

"That wasn't what I meant," she said. "But thank you for telling me. I have always had a high opinion of your intelligence, Mr. Donald. I shall not beat about the bush. I hardly need to tell you that we have been having a great deal of trouble with the Moray Frith. What you may not know, however, is that the situation is becoming critical." She paused significantly, turned her head to present her left (her best) profile to him, and stared out of the window. "A new ship came in last night," she said unexpectedly. "Captain Stullen's ship."

"The *Foolish Virgin*," said Mr. Donald, not without relish.

"Yes. You can see her out there in the Bay now. Just off the point."

"I saw her this morning," Mr. Donald said, puzzled, and looking not at the ship but at Thirza. "A fine vessel, ma'am."

She swung her face back to him. "Mr. Donald," she demanded; "why does Captain Stullen come to Kaysie year after year? What's the explanation?"

"I'm sure I don't know, ma'am. There's a lot of talk in the town of course, and the townsfolk have a pet theory of their own which might explain why he keeps coming back."

"And what is that theory, Mr. Donald?"

"It's somewhat coarse, ma'am."

She pondered that. "I think I should like to know it, anyway."

"Well, ma'am, the fact is they seem to think he has a woman in town."

"And what do *you* think, Mr. Donald?"

"Me? Oh, I think he has several."

She blushed, and, not realising that he could not see her for the sun, looked down in some confusion at the papers on her desk. She picked one up, laid it down again, and deliberately changed the

subject. "Mr. Donald," she said. "Who removed the ledger from the office?"

"I don't know, ma'am, for certain."

"Who do you think did it?"

"I don't know that I've the right to think aloud, ma'am. I can't prove anything."

"Speak up, Mr. Donald."

"Well, it wasn't me," Mr. Donald said. "And it wasn't Mortimer —I beg your pardon, ma'am—Mr. Mortimer. I would be prepared to swear that it couldn't have been Adam. And that leaves only Mair and George. It might have been George, but somehow I don't think it was. You asked me to tell you who I thought took it. Well, I can't prove anything at all, but I think it was Mair."

"But it might have been George?" she said, prompting him.

"George isn't exactly reliable," he said. "It must have occurred to you during your time in the office that George isn't what you might call a reliable character, ma'am."

She did not commit herself to an opinion. She was deeply interested in what Mr. Donald had just said, but she saw no reason to return his confidences. Besides, there was another matter in which, for the moment, she was much more interested. She strummed her fingers on the desk, glanced at Mr. Donald thoughtfully, and again stared out to sea. "Mr. Donald," she said, making up her mind at last and choosing her words with obvious care, "a situation has arisen which it embarrasses me to talk about. But talk about it I must. Mr. Skene"—she put up a hand to her hair and rearranged a curl at the nape of her neck—"Mr. Skene is a very fine gentleman. A gentleman of the highest ideals. And because of these ideals I am afraid that he is, sometimes—in fact, frequently—taken advantage of in business. I hardly know how to put this to you. Mr. Donald, the truth is, I am considering a project which would save Skene's, but of which Mr. Skene would certainly not approve if he knew. In such a matter could I—dare I—rely on your personal loyalty?"

"Yes, ma'am," Mr. Donald said promptly.

"Mr. Donald," she said, smiling, "I am most relieved to hear you say so."

"You can rely upon me implicitly, ma'am."

She said, still smiling: "There was a time when I felt that we

did not understand each other very well, Mr. Donald. I know now that that time has passed, and I am most glad, and most grateful to you." And then she drew herself up and resumed her usual crisp and business-like voice. "Well now, to return to my project. This ship of Captain Stullen's—this ship which, if you please, Mr. Donald, we shall leave unnamed—it has seemed to me that this ship would serve admirably to convey a consignment of Skene's herrings to Hamburg, and, if all I have heard is true, Captain Stullen is just the man to sail her through the blockade. Now don't interrupt me, Mr. Donald. I want you to act as my agent in the negotiations with Captain Stullen. You must listen carefully, because I dare not commit any of this to paper. This is what I want you to say, and, remember, these are the special terms I am prepared to offer. . . ."

She searched Mr. Donald's face in vain for some sign of enthusiasm. It was plain that he did not like the idea. He fingered his chin and scowled at his boots. He was in no hurry to express an opinion.

She waited impatiently. "Well," she demanded, "what is it?"

"Two things, ma'am. The first is the risk. There is not only the risk of Stullen being intercepted, there is also the risk that Stullen, having run the blockade, might decide to sell the consignment on his own account. If he did that, you would have no redress in the law."

"I know quite well that it would mean trusting Captain Stullen," she said, "but I am prepared to do so."

"Have you ever met the man, ma'am?"

"I've . . . seen him," she said shortly. "I don't know him socially of course. I have no reason to trust him. But this is a matter of dire emergency, Mr. Donald. I have no choice but to take risks."

"The risk of trusting Dirk Stullen is not one that most of the people around here would take, ma'am."

"I might not take it myself," Thirza said, "if I had a choice in the matter, but, as I've told you, I have no choice. This is our last chance to keep our heads above water." Her words recalled her last disastrous meeting with Captain Stullen, and she blushed furiously and stole a quick glance at Mr. Donald to see if he too had been reminded of that painful incident. Mr. Donald's expression reassured her. It was grave and preoccupied. He said slowly:

"Well, it's up to you, of course. It's your affair whether you trust Stullen or not. But I have to say, if you'll permit me, ma'am, that Skene's must be very hard put to it if you feel you have to take a gamble like this."

"We are very hard put to it," she said emphatically. "I thought I had made that quite clear. What is your second point?"

"The second point is even more important than the first," Mr. Donald said. "It's your figures, ma'am. If you mean to offer Stullen the terms you've just told me, where's your profit to come from? Begging your pardon, ma'am, it's just not a sound proposition from an economical point of view."

"Mr. Donald," Thirza said, "I think you are failing to consider the realities of the situation. It would not be proper for me to offer Captain Stullen a smaller sum. In view of the risks which Captain Stullen will be running on my behalf, it would be most improper of me not to offer adequate compensation."

"Yes yes, ma'am," said Mr. Donald, with a superior glimmer of a smile. "That's all very well, ma'am. But this is not primarily a matter of propriety. There is only a certain margin of profit, and by these terms of yours Stullen will have the whole of it." He might have been a schoolmaster correcting a fatuous child. "This is not a matter of morals, ma'am. This is business."

"Precisely," she said. "And that is why I tell you you have not got a grasp of the realities of the situation. My arithmetic is hardly so bad as you appear to think, Mr. Donald. You are considering the price I may expect to receive on the basis of past experience. You seem to forget that this consignment will be the first and probably the only consignment of Scotch herrings to reach the Baltic this season."

Mr. Donald's face lightened in sudden understanding. He slapped his knee, shook his head, and chuckled aloud. "You'll get twice the usual price," he said admiringly. "You're almost bound to, ma'am."

"I shall get six times the price," Thirza said. "At the least." She got up, plucking daintily at a twisted cuff. "Well, Mr. Donald, you see now how matters stand. Can I depend on you?"

"My God," Mr. Donald said, "yes. I beg your pardon, ma'am. I mean yes. Yes, of course you can."

(4)

Captain Stullen's response was not wholly satisfactory.

"He showed interest," Mr. Donald told her. "He asked a great many questions about you, and asked me to convey his compliments and to inform you that he would call at your convenience."

"Call!" Thirza said, in high dudgeon. "Call! Does he really think . . . what impertinence! Mr. Donald, you can go right back and inform this Captain Stullen that I do not receive persons like him, and, in addition, that I see no need whatsoever for a personal meeting between us." She considered that, fuming, tapping her foot on the rug. "Wait," she said. It was the height of impertinence for Captain Stullen to imagine for one moment that she, a woman in her position, would allow a man like him to call on her, and yet —she had to admit that it was reasonable that he should wish to meet her. There might be many points of detail on which he needed advice—advice which only she could give. In fact, now that she came to think of it, she saw that it would almost certainly be to her advantage to meet him face to face and to give him his orders in such a way that there could be no risk of ambiguity or misunderstanding. She sat down at her desk, snatched a sheet of notepaper from a pigeon-hole, and wrote:

"SIR,—

"I would have thought that you would have realised that your reputation and my circumstances are such that a meeting between us presents grave difficulties. It would be most indiscreet of you to visit me at the yard, and, frankly, I have so much respect for my husband that I do not care to have you set foot in his house. I had hoped to conduct this business entirely through my representative, but if you still feel that a meeting is necessary, I am prepared to give consideration to your suggestions as to its time and place. I would enjoin you, however, to bear in mind the need for secrecy and discretion. It is, of course, essential that I should not be compromised, and it would naturally displease me to be publicly associated with you."

She was not prepared to be Captain Stullen's Obedient Servant.

yard or traipsin' aboot in that high-falutin' cairt o' yours. Dinna interrupt noo. Jist let me say my bittie an' ha'e done. I'd remind ye it was a man ye mairried an' nae a business, an' if ye've got to neglect ene or the ither, better the business nor the man, for nae doot the business can stand it, an' the man canna. The simple truth is, ye'll hae your business a lang time langer than ye'll hae your man. I'm nae authority on sickness, but I've seen mair nor my share o' sick men, an' I tell you that William Skene needs a' the nursin' an' coddlin' that ye can gi'e him, for he's a sick man, a verra sick man, an' candidly, I dinna think he'll last oot the year." As he watched her, his mobile blood-red face underwent an extraordinary change. His eyebrows came down in a massive gesture of concern, his jaw shot out, his lips came together in an anxious pout. He thrust out a hand and grasped her firmly by the elbow. "I'm sorry, lassie," he said gently. "I didna ken ye'd tak' it like that. Easy then, steady noo, lassie. Are ye a' richt?"

"Yes, I'm . . . all right," she said.

"I'm an auld fule, Thirza. I'm nae doctor, an' I dinna ken fit I'm talkin' aboot. Mebbe William's nae sae bad. There noo, I'm sure he's nae sae bad. I'm sorry, lassie. I didna mean to scare ye. . . ."

"It's all right," she said. "I'm all right now, really I am." She took a deep breath. A touch of colour returned to her cheeks, and the terror dwindled out of her eyes and was replaced by a careful and a thoughtful look. "Whatever you may think," she said, "I do . . . I always have taken care of William." She couldn't go on. She was thinking of what the Minister had said, sifting each word for truth, carefully considering William's condition in the light of these new disturbing words. She moved slowly to the door, became aware that the Minister had opened it and that he was speaking. She focused her eyes on his face. "You see," she said, "I love William. You've never understood that. I couldn't neglect him. I love him, you see."

And then she went through to William.

She could not think that he was any worse than he had been. He was thin, certainly, and his colouring was far too delicate, but he had always been thin and he had always had that fine, almost girlish, complexion. She would not allow herself to be stampeded

into any sort of hysteria by the Minister's foolish fancies. William was all right. He just had a chill. It was preposterous to suggest that he was dying. Why, he had years of life ahead of him. Look how bright and cheerful he was, how keen his eyes were, how briskly he talked. . . . He had years and years of happy and healthy life ahead of him. She took his hand and held it fiercely. Of course he had. And the Minister was nothing but a morbid old fool. . . .

Nevertheless, she stayed with William all afternoon, and her preoccupation was such that it was not until almost supper-time that she remembered she had left Mr. Donald waiting in the sun-room. She made enquiries then, and found that he had left the house about four o'clock. She estimated that he had waited an hour and forty minutes, and it vexed her to think that she was entirely to blame.

Through her unpardonable carelessness Skene's had lost no less than one hundred minutes of Mr. Donald's working time. It was a sobering thought.

CHAPTER XVI

(1)

THE RENDEZVOUS DECIDED UPON WAS Captain Stullen's ship, brought close inshore and anchored, for Thirza's convenience, at the mouth of the little bay which she regarded as her own—a tongue of sea which thrust its way into a deep fissure in the rocks and which penetrated at high tide to the base of the cliff on which the White House stood.

On the night of Saturday, August 6, in answer to a light signal from the *Foolish Virgin,* Thirza, with a reluctant and protesting Manson as chaperone, descended the cliff by a zigzag path, terminating, at sea-level, in a thin strip of shingle beach. Here, a boat with muffled oars lay waiting, and after a further protest from Manson and an elaborate and prudish parcelling of Manson's skirts, the ladies, both heavily veiled, were at last got on board, and were rowed out to the large black parent ship.

A gangway had been let down at the lee side of the poop, and this the ladies mounted with difficulty, Manson first, flustered, clucking and squawking, Thirza close behind, soothing and exhorting, and from time to time expediting the ascent by prodding at Manson's large, reluctant beam.

They were received on deck with a formality which could not have been bettered on a man-of-war. A smartly dressed officer saluted each in turn.

"Mistress Skene?" he enquired of Manson.

"No. Her," said Manson with a jerk of her head.

The officer saluted Thirza again. "In that case, Madam, would you be kind enough to accompany me. Your friend will be entertained forr'd."

"Eh?" Manson asked. "What's that? What's that about me?"

"The Captain is of the opinion," the officer explained to Thirza, "that it would be better for your conversation to be private."

Thirza nodded. She was pleased to observe that the officer, apart from a slight peculiarity of accent—due, no doubt, to his being an Englishman—had the manners of a gentleman, and ordering Manson, who had begun to splutter, to hold her tongue and to do what she was told, she allowed herself to be guided aft, where a broad companion-way, holystoned bone white and defined by gleaming brass stanchions and silken manropes, led to the Captain's quarters.

The officer stopped before a large ornate door panelled in teak and bird's-eye maple and adorned with a carving of a schooner flying before a fair wind. This was the door of the Captain's cabin. The officer knocked and entered.

"Mistress Skene, sir."

"Bring her in."

Thirza braced herself and walked into the room. She had an immediate impression of luxury—of luxury such as she had never seen in all her childhood experience of ships, such as she had never even seen ashore, and then her attention was claimed and dominated by the man who rose slowly from his chair at the Dutch marquetry table. She thought that she had remembered exactly how Captain Stullen looked, but she found that her memory had not done him justice. He was a big man, but lankier than she remembered. He was wearing a long, navy double-breasted jacket, which pinched him at the waist and exaggerated both the span of his shoulders and the length of his body. Rising, he seemed to unravel himself like a caterpillar, his big shoulders looming in front of her and blotting everything else from her field of vision. He spoke, inviting her to be seated, and from then on she was aware only of his face.

It was a noticeable face, lean, long-jawed, dominated by the Indian cheek-bones which she had noted before, and behind which the eyes—odd, almost colourless eyes—watched her with flat, cool appraisal. It was hard to estimate his age. There were tiny wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and mouth, but these were merely the marks that weather wears into a sailor's face. His hair, which might sometimes be red enough to justify his nickname, was now slicked with water into a dark auburn, and, at a cursory glance, she could find no grey in it. Nevertheless, she decided that he must be quite old—perhaps thirty-five.

She sat down in a winged arm-chair and looked around, taking in a quick impression of a bandy-legged four-poster bed, of Persian rugs. of delicate inlaid mahogany furniture, of lacquered scrollwork and Eastern drapings, of magnificent ornaments of brass and silver and ormolu; and she noted at the same time that the officer who had taken her below had disappeared, and that the heavy door had swung to without any perceptible sound.

"Take off your veil, ma'am," Captain Stullen said. "I wished to meet you in order to see you. I have heard a lot about the lady in the White House."

"The lady in the White House has heard a deal about you too, Captain Stullen," she said.

"To my credit, I hope?"

His expression was pleasant, but his eyes remained cold. She put her hands up with deliberation to her veil.

"No," she said. "Not to your credit."

"You surprise me, ma'am."

As she removed her veil he watched her keenly. She was relieved to see that he did not appear to recognise her, but she was embarrassed by the fixity of his stare. She felt the beginning of a blush and immediately swung into a defensive attack.

"Sir," she said, "I thought I had made it clear in my letter that I did not wish to be compromised, yet your officer knew who I was and actually spoke my name."

"It was a remarkable letter," Stullen said, smiling. "It was the sort of letter one might write to a dog, presuming a dog could read. It whetted my interest in you, madam."

She bit her lip. "The fact remains . . ."

"My officers are discreet."

"And supposing they are not?"

"The supposition does not arise."

She was perplexed, and angry with herself for being perplexed. She had come aboard with the intention of taking charge of this conversation, of weighing up Captain Stullen, and, having taken his measure, of giving him his instructions clearly and concisely so that, even if he was a man of limited intelligence, he would know exactly what she wanted him to do and exactly how he was to do it. Now, feeling that the boot was on the other foot and that it was

she who was being weighed up, she was nervous and uneasy, but she put a face on it. "Well now," she said briskly, "with regard to our business, Captain. . . ."

"All in good time," Stullen said. "First, madam, we might drink a glass of wine to its success."

"I don't drink wine."

"Oh, come now, ma'am." He rose and crossed the cabin to an octagonal brass-bound mahogany cellaret stowed under the arch of an anchored sideboard, drew out a bottle of wine, dusted it with a napkin, and held it to the light, a strong hurricane-type ormolu lamp which hung head-high from a fixture on the skylight. "A champagne brut," he said, "from the slopes of Épernay. Very dry and light. You'll enjoy this."

She shook her head. She was puzzling over his accent. He spoke perfect English, but she thought she detected a slight nasal twang in certain of his words. Could he possibly be an American?

"Do you prefer Sauternes? I have a few bottles of Château Yquem. No? A Médoc or a Moselle then, perhaps?"

"No, thank you. I do not drink wine."

He gave her a searching glance, laid down the bottle, and took out a corkscrew and a single wineglass. He drew the cork and laid the smoking bottle on the table. He sat down and half-filled his glass with great care and deliberation.

"I presume, ma'am," he said, "that what you mean to say is, not that you do not drink wine, but that you do not drink it with me."

"As you please," she said impatiently. "I came here to discuss business, Captain Stullen, and our business requires no social intercourse between us."

He looked at her over the rim of his glass. "Ma'am," he said mildly, "you have a fault which I often find in your compatriots. You are too dogmatic. It does not rest entirely with you to say what sort of intercourse our association may require. To you, ma'am. To your health, to your beauty, and—to your manners."

"I did not come here to be found fault with," she said, nettled, "any more than I came here to drink wine with you. I came here to employ you. . . ."

"Ah! To employ me. That's interesting, ma'am. And to what use do you mean to put me?"

"I thought that was all arranged."

He raised his eyebrows.

"Mr. Donald—my agent—told you my terms. They're suitable, are they not?"

"Eminently suitable."

"In that case," she said, relieved, "all we need discuss is the manner of loading, the route you are to follow, the persons you are to meet in Hamburg, the terms you are to accept from them, and of course the time-table. When are you prepared to leave?"

"Whenever the herrings are ready for me."

"I can have the consignment ready in two days, three at the most. We'll give it out, if need be, that the shipment is for Ireland; nevertheless, the loading had better be done at night. If you will bring your vessel alongside the Old Harbour Wall to the westward of the Pier Light we can load, I think, in one night. I'll put all my men on the job. We'll start at ten o'clock on Tuesday—yes, Tuesday night—and you should be able to sail by dawn on Wednesday morning. With regard to the route, you are to sail to Stavanger in Norway. There you are to convey this package"—she drew an oil-silk sealed package from her cloak and laid it on the table—"to a Mr. Olaf Juliussen whose address I have inscribed. From him you will, I hope, get some idea of the naval dispositions in the Skaggerak and Kattegat, and thenceforth you will proceed on your own initiative. I would advise you, however, to hug the Scandinavian coast-line, and, once through Helsingor Sound, which, of course, is the maximum danger point and should be negotiated by night, to set your course to leave Borkum to the south and to approach the Haff from the eastward. This, however, I must leave to your discretion."

"Handsome of you, ma'am. And in Stettin?"

"In Stettin you will convey letters, which I shall give you later, to Herr Gorleitz, our Stettin correspondent. You will sell the consignment in conjunction with Herr Gorleitz, on whose advice you can rely implicitly in all matters connected with the trade. I shall endorse the bill of lading in blank, so that it is completely negotiable, and I shall draw it up in such a way that it contains neither fire nor barratry nor any other clause which imposes liability on you. I shall pay one-third of your freight in advance when your ship is

loaded, and the remaining two-thirds when you return. I shall also pay you a commission on a sliding scale, upon which I have not yet decided, on the price you obtain per barrel over a certain sum. I shall arrange these matters and inscribe all the details of our contract in duplicate before you sail on Thursday, and will deliver these on board to you by private messenger along with the bills of lading."

He had been watching her with his head cocked on one side, a half-smile on his lips. Now, as she finished and waited for him to speak, he raised his glass and sipped thoughtfully. "Excellent," he said, and drained the glass. "You really should learn to drink champagne, ma'am."

She waited impatiently for him to return to the point, but, seeing that he seemed perfectly content merely to sit and smile at her, she said shortly, "Well, what about it?"

"What about what?"

"My proposition. What do you think?'

"If you really want to know what I think, ma'am," he said, reaching lazily for the bottle, "I think you talk a deal too much."

She flushed scarlet.

"Furthermore," he said, "I think you should smile oftener. I doubt if you have smiled since you entered, and, as the conversation has been kind of comical, I am beginning to suspect that you haven't much of a sense of humour." He refilled his glass. "Champagne induces a sense of humour."

"Captain Stullen," she said. "I am not accustomed to being treated in this manner, and I will not have it. I must insist that you refrain from making personal remarks and apply yourself to the business in hand."

"Insist? Well, if you must you must, ma'am. Meantime, I think you should try a glass of this fine old extra dry champagne. It's very good for the liver."

"Captain Stullen, do you or do you not agree to my terms?"

"Your terms are all right, ma'am," he said, drawling. "I have no quarrel with your terms, although I have no great liking for your manner of expressing them. A ship's captain is not a clerk, ma'am, nor is he an imbecile. . . ."

"If I have offended your susceptibilities . . ."

"Damn my susceptibilities," Stullen said placidly. "And damn

your tongue, ma'am. Let me speak on board my own ship. I was telling you about ship captains. I think maybe you have a confused idea about ship captains. I think perhaps you have them mixed up with cabin boys. Cabin boys are small, about this size"—he indicated with the palm of his hand—"and you tell them what to do, and if they don't do it you kick them. But captains are bigger, you get some pretty big-size captains, and you got to go easy with the captains; you don't tell captains what to do, you ask 'em in a nice voice, ma'am, and you certainly never kick their backsides, no, ma'am, least not around this ship, you don't. I hope you're following me, ma'am?"

"I'm following you," she said grimly.

"Good. Well, now, this business of terms. You seem to be kind of mixed up about this too. You're a very business-like lady. I've never seen a lady so business-like, ma'am, and I hope never to see one again; but for all your business-like manner you seem to lack the first knowledge of business methods. It never seems to have occurred to you that a business agreement requires two parties, each with something to gain, and that of those two parties one usually stands to gain less than the other, and that therefore one of these parties is in a stronger position than the other. Now, in my limited experience, it has always been the party in the stronger position who makes the terms." He drained his second glass of champagne and laid it carefully on the table. "Now, ma'am," he said mildly, "how in hell's name did you ever get it into your head that you were stronger than me and in a position to dictate to me?"

She glared at him, speechless.

"I would genuinely like to know, ma'am. I'm not talking like you, ma'am, for the sake of hearing my own voice, of things I know nothing about, like sailing imaginary ships up paper seas. I'm askin' you because I would like to know how you ever got to be so pig-headed and goddam conceited. Like most ship captains, I'm a student of human nature, an' I would certainly admire to know how a pretty girl like you comes to turn herself into a dried-up windbag, with the gall to come aboard my ship to *employ* me, I think you said, ma'am, and to tell me what to do and how to do it." He poured another glass of champagne. "You want disciplinin', ma'am, and if I was your husband you'd get it."

"And just what would you do?" she said hotly.

"Me?" he said. "I'd put you across my knee and tan your delicate hide for you. Hard."

This was too much for Thirza. With an outraged cry she sprang to her feet, but before she could take a step, Stullen's voice, all the drawl gone, snapped around her like a whip. "Sit down," he commanded. "I'll take your herrings."

She stood stiffly, still pointed for the door.

"Did you hear me?" Stullen said. "I said, sit down."

She sat down.

"I hadn't any intention of taking your herrings until you came aboard, but you've charmed me into it, ma'am. Sure I'll take them, and be glad to. It ought to be a mighty interesting trip. But I'll take them on my own terms, not on yours."

She concentrated her gaze on an odd geometric design in the silk rug at her feet.

"And my terms are as follows. Freight as agreed, one-third to be paid in advance, and two-thirds on my return to Kaysie. How does that strike you?"

"But those are my terms," she protested.

"Not any longer, ma'am. They're my terms now."

She shrugged her shoulders. "And the commission?"

"I don't take commissions, ma'am. I don't want any fiddle-faddle with percentages. I'm not undertaking this trip for profit. If I was, I'd be crazy, for fish is no cargo for a ship like mine. I'm not going to Stettin for you, ma'am. No, I'm going because I'd kind of like to see what the Baltic is like these days, and because I'm always mightily interested in a matter like blockade."

"I don't really care a tinker's curse why you're going, Captain Stullen," Thirza said sweetly, "just so long as you're going."

"Now that's better," he said. "Much better. You nearly smiled there. And that reminds me of the rest of my terms. Just two small conditions. First, you're to drink a glass of champagne with me and like it. . . ."

"This is absurd, preposterous. I won't do it!"

"Well, ma'am, I won't take your herrings."

Their eyes met and locked, and it was Thirza's which were the first to fall.

"You'll get a glass," he said, "in the sideboard. The far side."

"I won't do it."

"Suit yourself, ma'am."

She knew she was beaten. "All right," she said, tight-lipped. "I'll drink a glass of your champagne, but I do it under protest."

"No, ma'am, you don't. You'll do it and like it. This wine's too good to be fooled with. I want to see you sit there and drain your glass like a perfect little lady or not at all."

She sat fuming.

"Maybe we ought to take the second and last condition first, ma'am. This one is very simple. Just one nice smile. One nice smile and one glass of champagne, and the contract's sealed."

"I might drink a glass of your wine," she said, infuriated by his mockery, "but I certainly wouldn't—couldn't smile to you."

"You mean that, ma'am?"

"I'll drink a glass of your wine under protest and I'll show you my teeth if that's what you wish, but I will not—I could not smile to you."

"You really mean that, do you, ma'am?"

"I mean it," she said. "And I also mean that I've had more than enough of this . . . this humiliating interview. I'm going."

"Not so fast!" As she sprang up, he also got to his feet, caught her by the elbow, and pulled her towards him.

"Let me go," she said. "How dare you!" She swung her free right arm viciously, but he caught it at the wrist and jerked her in against his body.

"I reckon I'm going to have to teach you a lesson, ma'am," he said softly.

"Take your filthy hands off me!"

He held her close to his chest, raised on her tiptoes, her arms pinioned. The lantern was behind them and his face was directly above her in the shadows. Looking up, she saw it from a new, strange angle. She saw his nostrils and the insides of his eyelids, and she saw his eyes briefly as malevolent, gleaming slits. She had a sudden overpowering consciousness of his masculinity. She got frightened then, really frightened, and a shudder ran through her.

"I'll scream!" she threatened.

"Scream if you must. It won't do you any good, ma'am."

"No doubt they're accustomed . . . to women screaming on board this ship."

"No doubt," he said.

She felt herself raised clear of the ground and moved across the cabin.

"What are you going to do?" she gasped.

"Precisely what you might expect, ma'am."

Panic seized her then. She wriggled violently, lashed out with her feet, butted him with her head, and would have bitten him had he given her half a chance. But now he had swung her completely up in his arms, her legs high and captured in the crook of one elbow, her arms still pinioned, and her head dangling over his shoulder, her hair streaming in disorder. And now, suddenly, she found herself on her back, squat as a flounder, her eyes going up and up till they felt to be turning over in their sockets. She was sure that she was going to faint.

She screamed then, and the sound, beating off the walls of the cabin, increased her terror, and she screamed again, and again; and then, gradually, she became aware that she was not going to faint after all, and that she was making a very great fuss and that it was not doing her any good. She began to feel a new emotion that was somewhere between excitement and anger, and she wanted to cry but was determined not to. Her eyes, roving wildly around the cabin beyond Stullen's head, came to rest on the clock on the bulkhead, and she saw with surprise that it wanted only a few minutes to midnight, and found herself wondering, quite lucidly and calmly, if he knew that he would have to make haste, for it would soon be the Sabbath. And then she became aware that her mouth was full of blood and that her limbs were on fire, and she thought that this must surely be death. She let her head fall deeper into the pillow and closed her eyes. "I hate him," she thought. "Hate him. . . ."

She thought no more.

(2)

Returning with Manson in the small boat, she sat very prim and straight in the cushioned seat at the stern. She heard Manson's

voice, but paid no attention to what it was saying. She felt light-headed and unlike herself, and although she knew there was a need to think, she could not force herself to think coherently. She was quite calm, but her limbs were sluggish, and she had the odd sensation that part of her mind was suspended in a dream. She was unable to sort out her feelings. She was angry of course—angry and hurt and humiliated. But that was not all. She was aware of another and deeper emotion which she did not care to investigate. She had never guessed—she would not have believed—that she was capable of experiencing such intensity of sensation as she had experienced in those terrible moments when the weight of Captain Stullen's body had pressed on her and purple lights had swum before her closed eyes. She had felt her identity slip away till there was nothing left of her, and in her place there had been a stranger, a fierce and primitive female creature. . . . She was shocked, not so much at what had happened, as at her own extraordinary and shameful behaviour.

She realised that Manson was tugging at her sleeve. "What is it, what's the matter, Thirza?"

She looked round slowly, surprised.

"Matter?" she said. "Nothing."

"Well, I've been speakin' to ye for a guid five minutes and I'll warrant ye hinna heard a word o't. Are ye sure you're a' richt, dearie?"

"Of course I'm all right."

"And that wisna you that screamed?"

Thirza licked her bruised lips. "Why would I be screaming?"

"Well," Manson said, relieved, "I could think up some good reasons, but so long as it wisna you that's fine. I could of swore it was you, though. Ye'll never get me aboard that accursed ship again. Did you get your business done? Thirza, are ye listenin' to me?"

"No, I'm not listening," Thirza said. She forced herself to concentrate. "What was it you said, Manson?"

"What's up wi' ye? Your mind's aye chasin' mice the nicht. I said, did you get your business done?"

"Oh yes," Thirza said. She thought about it. "The business was really very satisfactory."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that at least. Is he an obligin'-like chiel then, the captain? Is he, Thirza?"

"I wouldn't exactly call him that," Thirza said. "But what counts—I have to remember that what counts is that he is going to do what I told him. That's what I went on board for, after all. That's the only thing that matters." Although she was addressing Manson she was really speaking to herself. She was trying to convince herself against all her instincts that it was still right and proper for her to employ Captain Stullen to ship Skene's herrings. She knew very well that a truly respectable woman would have nothing more to do with a man who had sinned against her as Stullen had sinned—yet, one had to take a realistic view. What was done was done, and neither cancelling her business arrangements nor anything else would ever undo it. Surely it was only common sense to make what use of Stullen she could—to deal with him, not as an outraged woman, but as a business man—to hold him, now more than ever, to these advantageous terms?

She sighed. It was very difficult to be a respectable woman and a business man at one and the same time.

The small boat was now in the lee of the western arm of rock, and Thirza turned to look back towards the Frith, raising her veil to see better, and glad of the rush of air on her bruised mouth and hot cheeks. She could see the ship riding at anchor not much more than a cable's length away, a dark rakish silhouette against the paler sky, her masts looming like gallows, her standing rigging black and heavy at the bases of the masts and then rising aloft in spider-like permutations, her long, delicate, green and gold figure-head just a slight smudge, but still recognisable as a scantily clad maiden straining vainly forward. She shuddered. . . .

The sailors in the boat shipped their oars, and the man at the bows dropped noiselessly over the side into the shallow water and began to haul her up. As the keel crunched on the shingle, a small colony of gulls, rising from the rock above, circled overhead in momentary alarm, and a pebble, dislodged from some cleft, fell in a skitter-smack of sound from ledge to ledge down the rock face.

Thirza stood up and arranged her veil. With the house within earshot she had begun to think, with intense compassion, of William. Poor William. She was determined to make up for the

wrong that Stullen had done him. She would be more thoughtful, more attentive, more affectionate, more wifely than she had ever been before. She could hardly wait to begin.

Manson had begun another prudish curfuffle with her skirts as a preliminary to stepping ashore. Thirza impatiently held out a hand to help.

"Make haste then," she said. "Make haste."

(3)

Some five weeks later William took a turn for the worse. He had two very bad days during which he put up a lot of blood, and old Dr. Grant, who was not such a fool as Thirza thought him, mercifully applied leeches to rid him of still more blood. The result was that he became very weak, and before anyone but the doctor had realised that the end was near, he had passed into a coma from which he did not recover.

He died on September 14, 1864.

Thirza was dazed with grief. She had loved William very dearly. She had respected and depended on him, and she had grown so used to taking care of him that, in losing him, she felt she had lost a child as well as a husband. She was tortured with vain regrets. She thought now of all the things she might so easily have said and done to make him happy. She felt a deep kinship with the poor unhappy Queen, and, like Victoria, was quite sure that she would never get over her tragic bereavement. The night before the funeral she lay alone in the big bed which had been the scene of their genteel activities and wept as she had never wept before. She pushed her face into the soggy pillow and cried out in anguish for her dead husband. "Oh, William!" she sobbed. "William, I need you. . . ."

She was inconsolable. She was so prostrated that for three whole days she hardly thought of the business at all.

BOOK III

CHAPTER I

(1)

SHE HAD NOT THOUGHT THAT anyone could have so many relatives. They descended on the White House on the day of the funeral like a swarm of great black locusts—uncles, aunts, innumerable cousins, relatives by marriage, and, of course, William's two sisters, openly hostile and malevolently critical, canvassing the company for support, eyeing the furniture and whispering of heirlooms.

Thirza withstood the assault as best as she could. In intervals between hurried conversations with Manson, the lawyer, the Minister, the florist, and the undertaker, she made strenuous efforts to do her duty by her guests, to distinguish Cousin George from Cousin Alexander, to shout the right thing into Great-uncle William's ear trumpet, to sort out the family branches, and to give to each twig its due and proper meed of recognition; but as the morning wore on, and as more and more Skenes and Skene-Smiths and Hamiltons and MacGregors and Wrights, all clad much the same and all with much the same appropriately wooden faces, filed up in endless procession to murmur the conventional and now meaningless phrases, she gave up all hope of ever being able to follow the ramifications of this robust family tree. She just stood with a set wan smile on her face, offering a limp hand to anyone who seemed to expect it. She was quite exhausted.

Eventually, the ordeal was over. William was buried; the company was wined and dined and shaken yet again by the hand; and the house, at last, was quiet and empty. Thirza went through to the dining-room, where Manson, along with the two maids, was busy clearing the table.

"Well, it a' went off very well," Manson said briskly.

"Yes," Thirza said. "Mind how you carry that tray, Jessie."

Manson said, "Jist you go up to your room now, and I'll bring ye up a nice cup o' tea. Ye maun be tired."

"I'm not at all tired. I feel fine. Do you know how many were at the funeral, Manson?"

"A guid puckle."

"Over three hundred, somebody said. That's a very big funeral for Kaysie."

"Ay, it was a braw funeral," Manson agreed, lifting one end of the tablecloth and motioning to Ada, the elder of the maids, to take the other.

"I should think it's about the biggest funeral ever seen in Kaysie," Thirza said. "The Dominie was there. Mr. Simpson told me. Mr. Simpson said he was very clean and completely sober for once."

Manson, busy folding the cashmere cloth, cast a shrewd glance at Thirza and pursed her lips together. "Noo aff ye go upstairs," she said brusquely, "an' lie doon for a bit, and I'll be up by and by wi' something for ye." She stepped back to draw the partially folded cloth across the table, and as she did so her elbow touched the loaded tray which Jessie, the young maid, was carrying past her. There was a long moment of juggling while Jessie fought to keep the tray on an even keel, and then several of the cups toppled over the rim of the tray and, clashing as they fell, crumpled like eggshells on the carpet.

There was a long silence.

Thirza said, "Jessie. I told you . . . that beautiful tea service. . . ." She began to pant and then to sob. "I told you to be careful. Look at them. My best Worcester cups. Broken. All broken. Useless. Beyond repair. Gone. . . ."

She began to cry, almost unnoticeably at first, and then, as she felt the relief of abandonment, in increasing sobs and jerks, until finally she was standing there in front of them, not making any attempt to control herself or even to conceal her face, weeping hysterically. Manson put an arm round her waist and led her unresisting upstairs to her bedroom. She undressed her and tucked her into bed, and still Thirza continued to cry.

Manson closed the venetian blinds and returned to the bedside. "There now," she said, patting a heaving shoulder. "There now, ma dawtie. Ye've had a bad day. These women . . . that Mistress Jannet Skene, she'd flay a louse for its skin. If I could get at her, I'd pit my finger-nails in her, the tartar. There noo, there, Thirzy,

dinna tak' on so. Ye'll be a' richt in the mornin'. They was jist a pack o' evil, preen-tongued aul' women. . . ."

"It's not that," Thirza said, gasping. "I didn't mind about . . . the women. It was the men. Some of them were . . . some of these stupid old men were *kind* to me." And she buried her face in the pillow and bawled.

"There, there noo, lass, ye jist tak' a bit sleep tae yoursel'. I I winna let naebody disturb ye."

"No," Thirza said, raising her head briefly. "Nobody. Nobody!" But when Manson closed the door she called out loudly: "Except Mr. MacPherson. Manson, do you hear me? Manson!"

"I hear ye," Manson said.

"If Mr. MacPherson calls I'd like to see *him*."

"A' richt, dearie. If Mr. MacPherson comes I'll tell ye."

But when John MacPherson called that evening, Thirza was sound asleep, lying on her back with her arms outflung like a child's, and Manson did not disturb her.

(2)

The Moray Frith Curing Company was not long in showing its hand. Exactly a week from the day of William's death Thirza received a letter from James Craig, one of the managers. This letter made long and fulsome reference to the late William Skene, and came to the point only in the last paragraph.

"You will no doubt be aware," Mr. Craig wrote, *"that your late husband was negotiating with us regarding our proposed purchase of William Skene & Co. At a meeting to-day of the Directors of the Moray Frith Curing Co., it was unanimously agreed to offer you the same generous terms as we offered to your husband, this despite the fact that Mr. Skene's death has materially altered the circumstances, in that much of the business which formerly was Skene's can be expected, in the natural course of events, now to devolve on us. I shall be glad to receive your representative at any time to discuss details and to sign the necessary documents. I have to apologise for intruding business upon you so soon after your tragic bereavement, but you will appreciate that we are anxious to take over immediately in order to modernise Skene's equipment and*

to adapt the business to our own requirements before the start of the new season. . . ."

Thirza did not reply to this letter, and a few days later Mr. Craig and Mr. Robertson, the joint managers, called together at the White House and requested an interview. She refused to see them. Mr. Craig's letter, with its untruths and its veiled threats, had been just the stimulus she had needed to rouse her from her apathy following William's death. She was now at the office day and night, and she drove Messrs. Mortimer and Donald almost as hard as she drove herself. She was determined to reorganise Skene's on a sound business basis, to eliminate the weaknesses which had arisen out of tradition and sentiment, to strengthen her defences in advance at all the points where she thought the Moray Frith most likely to attack.

Orders issued from her in a constant stream. First of all, the head office was to be set up in the White House. This might entail a certain inconvenience, but such inconvenience was unavoidable. It would not be proper for a woman—for a lady in her position—to go to work each day. Mr. Mortimer and the office boy would continue in the yard, where it would be necessary to maintain an office of sorts. Mr. Mair was to be discharged. Mr. Donald, Mr. Adam, and a new healthy clerk would take over two rooms now being prepared for them in the west wing of the White House. Freights were too high. Aberdeen, Dundee, and Leith shipping firms were to be asked to submit estimates. The kiln was to be remodelled. This time the roofing tiles should be pointed against downdraught, and a second set of air-duct openings made just at the easing. Anderson was charging far too much for his larch. She wanted one-third reduction in the price per ton, and Mr. Donald was to inform Mr. Anderson, with her compliments, that if she didn't get it she'd place her order elsewhere. Mr. Mortimer was to write Pudleigh & Swanson complaining of the price and quality of the salt they had been supplying, and was simultaneously to ask other Liverpool firms to send samples and prices. All expenses were to be reduced to a minimum, and meantime—while the war situation remained unchanged—stocks were not to be renewed.

"Skene's must be efficient," she explained. "I want to expand

Skene's into the biggest curing business in the north of Scotland, but first of all there's a lot of deadweight to cut away and now is the time to do it. I'm going to get a small, compact, efficient yard to start with, and once I've got that I'll build on it. Mr. Mortimer, is that new filing system completed?"

"Not just yet," Mr. Mortimer said. "It's a long job, ma'am, as you know. . . ."

"I know nothing of the sort." She was becoming increasingly impatient with Mortimer and Mortimer's everlasting objections. "Get it finished to-day, Mr. Mortimer." She held up her hand. "Now don't tell me it's impossible. Work your clerks till they finish it—all night if need be. And that reminds me. I have decided that office hours during the summer months, from June 1 to September 30, are to be increased by one hour in the evening."

"The present office hours have been in force, madam," Mr. Mortimer said, spluttering, "for over thirty-five years, and they've served very well."

"No doubt," she said with the glimmer of a smile. "As from to-day and for the next thirty-five years, however, they will be somewhat different, and I think you'll find, Mr. Mortimer, that they will serve even better."

Although she was occupied almost entirely with matters of detail, she never lost sight of the overall picture. She kept her sense of perspective. The little economies which she was effecting were important, not in themselves, but only in so far as they contributed, in the long run, to the efficiency of Skene's. It was all very well to save pennies on overheads, but if Stullen failed to come back with a handsome profit and if the Baltic remained closed for another fishing season and if the Moray Frith continued to under-cut her, well, then, Skene's would just simply have to go bankrupt, no matter how many pennies were saved. She thought continuously of Stullen, not of Stullen the man, but of Stullen the agent, and she prayed each night, without any sense of incongruity, that God would preserve him, take him safely through the blockade, and award him a substantial price per barrel. All her fondest hopes were centred on Stullen. She even dreamed of him, waking up sometimes in a cold sweat, with a picture in her mind's eye of Stullen's vast body dangling on a rope from a man-o'-war's yard-arm, and

with a great slab-like feeling of horror in her stomach, not because Stullen was dead, but simply because Skene's was doomed. She would lie on her back massaging the dread out of her stomach, staring at the upholstered bed tester, rationalising her fears away. She told herself that Stullen was bound to get through the blockade. He was clever, cunning, ruthless, and his life depended on it. Stullen would get through all right. He had to, for Skene's. "Please God," she would say earnestly, fixing all the weight of her will on Him, "Please God." And she never omitted to add her little reminder. "And a good price."

(3)

She was at her desk from early morning till midnight. She reviewed every aspect of Skene's policy and considered almost every detail of organisation. She was completely engrossed in her work and, just as, soon after her mother's death, she could hardly remember the time when she herself had not been the woman of the house, so now she could scarcely credit that there had ever been a time when she had not been in sole charge of Skene's.

The menace of the Moray Frith Curing Company hovered like a dark cloud over all her days. She had only to hear the name Carmichael to stiffen like a small fighting dog confronted with a big one, and sometimes her fear so possessed her that she had to make a great effort of will to unfreeze her mind. She would then throw herself more energetically than ever into her work, employing some physical action as a distraction, putting on paper figures which as likely as not she already knew by heart, or issuing new orders to her clerks on subjects on which one would have thought the last word had already been spoken. And while she wrote or spoke, apparently with absolute concentration, she was considering her fears, arguing them away, reminding herself that Richard Carmichael was only a man, that he most certainly underestimated her, and that, even if he brought all his power to bear against her, she (and of course she meant Skene's) would still have a chance of survival, for if Captain Stullen returned—if only• Stullen would return with that handsome profit of her prayers—she would be in an unassailable position for at least a year. And a year was a very long time.

At the moment she could measure Skene's existence only in weeks, and this was without the active opposition of the directors of the Moray Frith, for they were biding their time, confident that Skene's was already theirs. They had good reason for their confidence. It was shared by everyone in the fishing industry, including Skene's own employees, and the drift of fishermen to the Moray Frith, which had begun during William's illness had, since his death, increased at an alarming rate. This was now Thirza's biggest problem. At first, it had not seemed of much consequence for, without markets, there had been no advantage in retaining a great fleet of boats. Indeed, as her financial position grew increasingly worse, she had been glad to see her fishermen shifting to the Moray Frith; she had regarded their departure with satisfaction as an economy. But now it was not in ones and twos, but in whole batches that they were leaving her, and those who remained did so, for the most part, only because their contracts forbade them to leave until the end of the season. They were nervous and uneasy. Their hearts were not in their work, and she could not blame them. What was the sense in bringing in fish for which you might not be paid?

Yet somehow she had to stop the rot. She had to check the flow of her fishermen to the Moray Frith before it reached disastrous proportions. She had to re-awaken their loyalty to Skene's, and inspire them with a new confidence in her. And she had to do it soon.

She discussed the problem with John MacPherson one evening in her sitting-room. She had converted the little room adjoining the sun-room (now her private office) into a sitting-room, and she had made it very comfortable with soft chairs, a bright Hamadan rug, and a clutter of fashionable Chelsea porcelain figures. Here, she had deliberately excluded all sign of work. She had concentrated on making a feminine and charming little room (a Carmichael House sort of room), and in it, seated opposite John MacPherson of an evening, she could allow herself to be a very different person from the brisk business woman she had been all day and would be again when John MacPherson left.

Usually she sat back in her chair and treated herself to the luxury of relaxing. She talked about people who did not concern her directly, and affairs which were not her own. She gossiped. She

even ventured to express opinions on political matters, of which she knew nothing, and she listened, with attention and interest, to John's accounts of his work and doings, and, with rather less interest, to the news which had reached him from the outside world. She did not often introduce her own affairs into these evening conversations, partly because it was so restful *not* to consider Skene's for a little and partly because some instinct warned her that the less John MacPherson knew about her conduct of Skene's the better. He was so like William, full of principles, but obstinately opposed to the only means of implementing them. She knew very well that there were many things which John, not being himself a business man, would never understand, and therefore she told him nothing of the counter-measures she was taking against the Moray Frith.

On this particular evening, however, she was tired and worried. The thought of her fishermen and the decision she had come to only an hour or two previously so dominated her thoughts that she could not attend to the conversation, and after a little she brought up the subject in spite of herself. She said, "You know I've been having trouble with fishermen leaving, joining the Moray Frith?"

"Yes," John said. "I've gathered that."

"Well, it's become serious. I've got to put a stop to it." She bit her lip, watching him. "I've decided to speak to them."

"You mean, to them all?"

"Yes. I intend to call them together and make some sort of appeal to them. It's the only course left to me."

John was frowning, not looking at her, staring into the fire. "And what will you say?"

"I'll point out how false all these rumours are. You know, these stories about Skene's selling out to the Moray Frith and Skene's going bankrupt."

"And do you think that'll do any good?"

"I think so. It's these rumours that are unsettling them. If once they know beyond a shadow of doubt that I am going to carry on Skene's and that I mean to fulfil all William's obligations to them, I think I can depend on their standing by me. Another thing I'd tell them is that these rumours are being deliberately spread with a view to weakening Skene's, and that it is their duty to do all they can to scotch false reports of this kind. It might do a lot of good to talk

to them—I certainly must do something or I won't have a business left—and it can't do any harm." She appealed to him directly. "Can it?"

"I don't know," John said slowly. "Couldn't someone else talk to them?"

"Who, for instance?"

"Well, your head clerk. That old fellow."

"Mortimer. Impossible."

"Or the young man you've told me about. Young Donald."

"No. Donald wouldn't do."

"You've often told me how promising he is."

"And so he is," she said. "But he hasn't enough authority with the fishermen. He doesn't know the men, doesn't even talk their language. He just wouldn't do at all. They wouldn't take any notice of what he said, or at least not enough notice. No, I have to do this myself. I'm sure of that."

"And where would you talk to them?"

"At the yard, I suppose."

"You'd call a meeting?"

"Yes. I'd instruct them all to be there. I know what you don't like. You don't like the idea of me, a woman, talking—making a speech to a lot of men. That's it, isn't it?"

"Partly," John MacPherson said. "I admit that it doesn't seem altogether proper. People will talk about it, you know. . . ."

"Talk!" she said. "People have always talked about me. I don't care for their idle gossip. I don't care what they say about me as long as my friends understand. . . ."

"But you must care," John Macpherson said. "Not enough to influence you in important things, but you must pay some regard to public opinion. I mean, purely for your own sake. Public opinion does count, you know. And a woman in your position has to be careful." He darted a glance at her. "Do you know what I heard yesterday? That they are talking about you and me. It couldn't be more absurd of course, but it appears there's been a lot of talk."

"I don't understand," she said. But she understood perfectly. She had been dreading this.

"I learned about it only yesterday," John said. "I couldn't believe

it at first. It's one of the reasons I came to-night. Perhaps I oughtn't to tell you, but it's being said in the town that we . . . well, that I'm visiting you—and that I ought not to do so."

"But you've always been a constant visitor at the White House."

"It was different when William was alive."

"I see," she said, and she contrived to look as if this was the first time that this particular thought had occurred to her. "And do you care what the gossips of the town say?"

"Not very much," John said.

"But I suppose you want to protect me?"

John MacPherson looked at his boots. He was deeply embarrassed. He had never taken part in a discussion of this kind before, and he felt that he was making a sorry mess of it. He wished that he had not brought up the subject at all, but he had felt it his duty to warn her, and now, having warned her, he wanted to have done with it, to leave it in her mind as it was in his until, after due and cautious reflection, it should resolve itself into a plain problem of ethics, to which a plain answer might be given. The question would be, Is it right for me to continue to visit her? And the answer would be, No. And when he reached that answer he would accept it as final, no matter what personal sacrifice it might entail. He would cease to visit her. He had so far only formulated the point to be solved, but Thirza was already many weeks ahead of him, and she could see the inevitable progression of events—his visits becoming less and less frequent and finally ceasing altogether —probably "because of the pressure of business." She had not been unprepared for this issue. She had known all along that eventually it must come between them, and she had decided in advance how to treat it. She must give it short shrift. She must kill it at birth, and do so so casually and properly that no ghost of it might be left to haunt them.

She said, "This sort of thing is really too silly for intelligent persons to discuss seriously. If you were to stop visiting me now it would be a proof that the gossips were right. It would certainly be a victory for them and a bitter defeat for me—and at a time when I sorely need every friend I have. I don't need to tell you how much I depend on you. I'm in serious difficulties, John"—she let the Christian name slip out for the first time and rushed on, abashed at

her own temerity—"and there's nobody except you with whom I can speak in the way I used to speak to William. I need your friendship. . . ."

"You have it," John said. He did not look up at her, and she noted, not without satisfaction, that his neck was pink with embarrassment. "You can always depend on me."

"That's a great relief," she said, intent on driving her point home. "You frightened me. I thought for a moment that perhaps you were seriously considering giving up your visits to me, and I don't think I could bear that now. You're my last link with William, with the old life, and, more than that, I need your advice and your help. . . ."

"You always know," John said, still not daring to look at her, "that I'll help you in any way I can."

"You won't desert me? You won't let these silly gossips drive you away?"

"Of course not," he said gruffly, and she noticed that his neck had turned a deeper shade of pink than ever. Well satisfied, she pressed the bell for tea. . . .

Later, she turned the conversation back to her project of addressing the fishermen. "You said," she reminded him, "that people would talk. I know they will. I know that once it's known that I am going to carry on the business everybody will disapprove, but I really don't care what they say. I can't afford to. I have to tell my fishermen the position. Of course, it means that the Moray Frith will start regarding us as a rival again and may make things very awkward for us, but that can't be helped: I must stop my fishermen from leaving me. Seriously, do you see any *real* reason why I shouldn't talk to them?"

"I very much doubt if it will do any good," John said. "I doubt if the fishermen will like it. They're queer cattle. . . . I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that, but you know what I mean."

"Yes, I know exactly what you mean," she said, smiling. "After all, I'm practically a fisherman myself. But it doesn't really matter whether they like it or not, as long as they listen to me and believe what I say. You think they'll think it improper for me to talk to them?"

"Yes, I do."

"I don't think that matters," she said. "Is there anything else you have against it?"

"Yes," John said. "I don't like to say this." And she could see he didn't. He was speaking in obvious embarrassment, studiously addressing his deformed foot. "William would not have liked it."

"I know that's true," she said gently. "William would never have permitted it. But, then, if William had been here the occasion would never have arisen. It is to save William's business, to honour William's own obligations that I am doing this thing. I know it's not womanly, but I'm not in a womanly position. It can't be wrong for me to do this simple thing. In fact, it's right. I know it is. Won't you agree, knowing how important it is, that it's right that I should speak to them?"

"If you feel so strongly that it's right, then I suppose it must be," John said slowly. "I don't like it myself. I don't really approve of your standing up in front of a yard full of fishermen to harangue them, but I've come to respect your judgment, and if you feel it's right, then that's all there is to be said about it."

"You agree to it then?"

He gave her a rueful smile. "Well . . . yes."

She was pleased, and that night, before going to sleep, she was easier in her mind than she had been for some days. She would arrange for a meeting of the fishermen to be called the day after to-morrow. There would be opposition from Mortimer, of course, but she simply would not listen to his senile old-fashioned arguments. She would make all the arrangements through Mr. Donald.

She lay staring into the darkness for over an hour. "He has come to respect my judgment," she said softly several times.

When she finally fell asleep she was smiling.

CHAPTER II

(1)

MR. DONALD KNOCKED AND POKED his head round the door. "Everything is ready now, ma'am," he said.

She nodded. For the past twenty minutes she had heard the sounds of the fishermen gathering in the yard. She had heard the clip of their studded boots on the cobbles, and she had heard their voices, sharp and deep as they passed her window and blurring off into a low and very masculine hum as they assembled in the main yard outside the office door. She had been acutely aware of every sound, and she had been, and still was, in a dither of nervousness. She said, "Are they all there?"

"Every man jack, as far as I can see."

"Have you got steps up to the platform?"

"Everything's ready for you, ma'am."

She collected a few unnecessary papers from her desk and got up abruptly. Outside, she fancied that the hum of voices had become louder, and that it contained a new and surly note. She felt her eyes lifting in panic, and she pulled them down with a conscious effort of will and fixed a frown on her face.

"Very well, Mr. Donald," she said sharply. "Let's go."

The sounds in the yard dwindled off into silence as she appeared in the doorway. She climbed on to the packing-case which had been set down outside the office door to serve as a platform, gripped the edges of the desk which topped it, and looked around the yard.

Skene's fishermen looked back at her. They were all men whom she knew personally, whom she had known all her life, men whose sisters and daughters and granddaughters she had played with on the braehead, men whose faces were almost as familiar as those of the members of her own family, yet as she looked at them now from the unfamiliar eminence of her packing-case she saw no one she recognised—she saw no one at all—only a looming blur of faces.

She made the gesture of a smile and said huskily, "Come closer."

"Come in closer, men," Mr. Donald shouted, from behind her. She nodded gratefully, glanced at her papers, saw the glass of water and thought, "I must be careful not to knock it down," and looked back at the sea of navy guernseys and dim, vague faces. "I asked you to come," she said, "because I have some important things to say to you." The sound of her voice reassured her. She focused her eyes deliberately and caught sight of Tarry Bowie's countenance a long way off at the circumference of the crescent of fishermen. "Come closer, Tarry," she called. "Right in close. You can't possibly hear me all that way off." She waited while they shuffled in, pleased at her control over them, feeling the beginnings of confidence. She kept her eye on Tarry Bowie, and it was to him she spoke.

"Most of you have been with Skene's for years," she said, "and you all know that you've always had fair play from Skene's. I have heard it said that some of you want to go elsewhere now that Mr. Skene is dead. I have heard it said that you are unwilling to work for a woman, especially perhaps a woman who was herself a fishergirl only a short time ago. I suppose you think that a woman's place is in the home. Yes," she said, smiling at the corroboratory rumble from the crowd, "I guessed that was what you thought. And I have no doubt that you also think that in these difficult times a woman, especially a young woman like me, will be unable to conduct a curing business and, in consequence, that Skene's will go bankrupt. And so now you would like—some of you—to desert the sinking ship." She looked from face to face, hoping to find sympathy and fancying that she saw instead only a stubborn hostility. "Well," she said, "you can leave, any of you who feel like that. If you'll come and see me after I finish speaking I'll hand you your contracts and you can leave Skene's, not at the end of the season or whenever your contracts expire, but now. I don't want a single reluctant fisherman on Skene's books.

"But first of all I want you to give me a fair hearing. I want you to listen with open minds to what I have to say. Will you do that for me?"

There was no reply. She looked around with a smile, noting how hard and expressionless their faces were, feeling anxiety like a

clutching hand in her stomach. This was all far more difficult than she had anticipated, and she knew instinctively that the speech she had planned would not do for this mistrustful audience. She laid her papers regretfully on the desk in front of her, moistened her smiling lips, and continued. "There has been a rumour, a very strong rumour, that the Moray Frith is taking over Skene's. I want you all to know that this rumour is completely untrue. The Moray Frith Curing Company has made an offer for Skene's, and it has been turned down. Even if the offer had been twice as good, or ten times as good, it would still not have been accepted. Skene's is not for sale. I want you all to be quite sure of that and to give the lie to that story the next time you hear it. Skene's has a longer tradition of service than any other curing firm on the coast, and that tradition will be carried on. I'd like to speak for a few minutes now about another rumour that has been circulated by Skene's enemies and which all of you have heard. This is, that Skene's is on the verge of bankruptcy. I want you all to know . . ."

"Speak up!" someone shouted.

"Come closer," she said. "I'm not going to shout." She had their attention now. They moved quickly, crowding in, and their obvious interest pleased and steadied her. She felt increasingly sure of herself. "I want you all to know," she continued, "that the story about Skene's going bankrupt is just as untrue as the other story about selling out to the Moray Frith. Some of you are looking doubtful. You are thinking, perhaps, that these are just words, and that it's easy to speak. Now listen to me and use your heads. I have told you that the Moray Frith have made an offer to buy out Skene's and that I have refused their offer. Do you think that I would be such a fool as to refuse it if Skene's was on the verge of bankruptcy, if there was any danger whatsoever? I won't make any attempt to mislead you. Skene's *has* been having a bad season —one of the worst in our history—but it hasn't been so bad that we can't weather it, ay, and another two or three bad seasons on top of it if need be. None of you need be afraid that you won't get paid in full. Supposing—just supposing, for the sake of facing the worst—supposing Skene's did fail, do you imagine that even then we would not pay off our obligations to our fishermen in full? I guarantee—and I guarantee it on my honour and on the honour of

the house of Skene—that not one of the fishermen who has signed a contract with Skene's will ever be asked to accept one groat less than his due by contract. I've said we've been having a bad time—that's due mostly of course to the war—but it is also due, in part, to the fact that in the last year or two of my husband's life a certain company, which I shall not name and which I do not need to name to you, has been employing all the most unscrupulous means to try to force Skene's out of business.

"These rumours which you have heard, and which some of you have believed, have been deliberately manufactured to weaken Skene's, to unsettle you, and to tempt those of you who have contracts with Skene's to seek to make contracts elsewhere. I can tell you that none of the physical handicaps which my husband suffered during the past two years pained him so much as the knowledge that certain of his fishermen—men whom you all know but who, of course, are not here to-day—men whom he regarded as his friends and whom he himself trusted implicitly—that these men did not trust him, were ready to disbelieve him when he said, as he said to you all, that Skene's would carry on, and actually left him as rats leave a sinking ship when they knew that he was dying. I can tell you that that hurt my husband very much indeed. I know that I cannot expect any of you to trust me as you trusted my husband and my husband's father before him, but I hope that some at least of you will remain long enough with me to learn to trust me too. You all know that the fight which is now going on between our competitors and ourselves is a fight to the death, and I know that you must doubt whether a young woman like me is fit to fight my husband's battle against a powerful combine which has the backing of some of the most important—and some of the most unscrupulous—men in the district. I must ask you to take it on trust when I tell you that I know very well what I am doing, and when I assure you—and I do assure you of this—that if you stick to William Skene's widow as you stuck to his father and to him, we'll not only pull through, but, if necessary, we'll break our very powerful competitors into the bargain. All I ask of you is to give me a fair trial. Stay with me for a couple, say three years, and at the end of that time, given ordinary luck, I warrant you'll be better off than you ever were before."

This was all—indeed more than—she had meant to say, but, shrewdly searching the faces of the men in front of her, she saw that they were still uncertain. She had not yet convinced them. She made a deliberate smile and went on talking, groping in her mind for some further concession which would persuade them that they must stay with Skene's. And they *must,* of course, for without them there would be no Skene's.

"I have not appealed in any way to your emotions," she said. "I think if I appealed to you in a certain fashion you would probably all stand by me, but I do not wish to take any kind of advantage of the fact that I happen to be a woman and the widow of a man whom we all trusted and respected and whom some of us also loved. It would seem to be contemptible to appeal to you on these grounds and to hold your allegiance, as it were, by trickery. I have preferred to call to your attention only the business aspect of this affair, and there is just one more suggestion I would now like to make to you. And that is this. I have no desire to make big profits. My object is to continue Skene's policy to offer employment at fair rates and to as many folk as possible. I want, as my husband always wanted, to see not only Skene's prospering, but to see everyone concerned with Skene's—all Skene's employees—prospering. I therefore propose to introduce a profit-sharing scheme, whereby each one of you will share, over and above the sums for which you have contracted, in Skene's profits."

"Ay, ay," somebody said. "But fit aboot the losses?"

"Ay, fit aboot the losses?"

"There will be no losses," she said.

"But fit if there are?"

"You will not be responsible for any of the losses. That will be clearly stated in the new contracts I propose to draw up. Your contracted sums will be guaranteed, plus a proportionate share in the profits."

"And bonuses?" somebody asked.

"There will be no bonuses."

"The Moray Frith . . ."

"I know very well that the Moray Frith is offering big bonuses, but don't you see, the only reason that they are offering these bonuses is in order to tempt you all away? Once you're all on the

Moray Frith's books and Skene's has gone to the wall—do you imagine for one minute that your fine bonuses will continue then? You know the men who are running the Moray Frith. You know the men whose money is behind the men who are running the Moray Frith. Is anyone fool enough to think that these men will be content year after year to operate their company without profits? Does anyone here think that these men are in business for any other reason except to make profits? Has anyone any reason to believe that any single one of these men is interested in the welfare of the people of the Fishertown? Have they ever, in all the time you've known them, taken any interest, done anything at all to help the people of the Fishertown? Do you think they care what happens to you or to your wives or your children? You know very well—all of you—that they're in the fishing business only for what they can get out of it—for what they can get out of you—and once they've achieved a monopoly—once, with your help, they've put Skene's and some of the other, smaller businesses out of commission —once they have it all their own way, do you imagine then that they're going to go on paying big bonuses to their fishermen? They'll reduce wages to starvation-point, they'll cancel many of their contracts because they'll find themselves with too many fishermen and because it will pay them to have a pool of unemployed persons from which to draw at will for next to nothing. The Moray Frith is paying bonuses just now for one reason and one reason only, to tempt you away from Skene's. Once it has got you, your bonuses will stop and your guaranteed sums will drop, and those of you with any sense know it."

"But, Thirza," Geordie Wood said, "you're offerin' a share in the profits in jist exactly the same way as the Moray Frith is offerin' bonuses. Suppose, jist suppose the Moray Frith went oot o' business, ye'd be jist as like to drap oor share o' the profits. . . ."

"No," she said, retrieving the situation quickly, "you've missed the whole point, Geordie. I'm guaranteeing you for all time. As long as you have a contract with Skene's I'm guaranteeing you a share of the profits, and that will be clearly stated in your new contracts."

Geordie Wood nodded his head and a murmur of approval rippled through the crowd. "I don't want anybody to make up his

mind in a hurry," she said. "You can discuss it together and then you can examine a specimen contract. I'll have one drawn up to-night and you can see it in the office in the morning. I want you to take your time over this and decide wisely. I think that's all I want to say to you, except this. If it so happens that anyone has already made up his mind that he wants to leave Skene's, well, I'll be in Mr. Skene's old room for the next hour or two, and anyone who wishes can have his contract from me. I don't want to hold a single one of you against his will."

She stopped speaking and leaned forward for a moment on the desk. She had said all there was to say—far, far more than she had ever intended, and even now, after all her concessions and extravagant promises, she was still not sure whether she had won the day or not. She felt tired and also a little foolish. She had hoped for so much. She had hoped for some spontaneous outburst of loyalty. She had even hoped that they might cheer her. And look at them. Ignoring her. Not even watching her. Talking together, half of them with their backs to her, not one of them paying her the slightest attention. She stepped down off the raised platform and looked at Mr. Donald. Mr. Donald smiled and his lips said, "That was fine, ma'am." But she could not smile back at him. She was angry with herself for having conceded so much for so little, and yet she knew that she had had no choice but to make these concessions; it had been her only chance of holding them. She walked slowly into the office. And now she must make out that contract. . . .

"Mr. Mortimer," she said. "We'll tackle the contract now."

"Eh what?" Mortimer said, raising his head from his ledger. "What contract, ma'am?"

"The new fishermen's contract I spoke of just now."

"A new fishermen's contract!" Mortimer said. "So we're to have a new fishermen's contract now, are we, ma'am?"

She walked past him towards the office which had been Mr. Skene's. "Mr. Donald had better come too," she said. "We've got to thrash this thing out in detail, so that we can have a specimen ready first thing to-morrow morning to submit to the lawyer."

"And what, if I may ask, ma'am—what form of contract is this to be, ma'am?"

"You heard what I said to the fishermen, didn't you?"

"No, ma'am."

She stopped at the door of the inner office and looked hard at Mortimer. He was shuffling the papers on his desk in that haphazard and pointless way which she had always found so irritating, and though she could not see his face, she knew him well enough to realise from every gesture, from the very mould of his back as he bent over his desk, that he was engaged in enjoying one of his little office triumphs. "And why did you not hear what I had to say to the fishermen, Mr. Mortimer?"

"Well, ma'am," Mortimer said, "candidly, ma'am, to be quite honest, it did not seem necessary for me to listen. I had work to do."

She glanced at the open window, realised that he could not very well have avoided hearing her, and felt a hot spirt of anger. He had been against her talking to the fishermen, of course. He had been against this as he had been against every other departure from routine. He had even had the impertinence to say that William would not have approved. And now he was saying in his own peculiar roundabout and infuriating way that he had told her so, that she had not only wasted her breath, but that she had humbled herself and humbled Skene's into the bargain. And he had had the temerity to insult her quite openly by saying that he had not listened to her speech, when in fact he must have heard every word of it. She began to tremble with anger. "Mr. Mortimer," she said, "you might be good enough to come into my room. I shall ring for you when I want you, Mr. Donald."

She sat down at the desk and waited for Mortimer to come in, thinking how typical of him it was to keep her waiting. She sat tapping her fingers on the black leather desk covering. She ought to have tackled Mortimer long ago, of course, when William died. She ought to have got rid of him then. But that wasn't of consequence now. Meantime she must take a hold of herself. This was a landmark in her life and a still greater landmark in Mortimer's. She must assign it the dignity it merited. She drew her hand firmly across her eyes, sighed away her fatigue, and sat bolt upright in her chair.

"Come in and sit down, Mr. Mortimer," she said.

"I beg your pardon."

"I said, sit down," she said gently.

Mortimer sniffed three times and sat down disapprovingly on the edge of a chair. She had an idea that it was only with difficulty that he refrained from pointing out that it was not the custom at Skene's to ask even the head clerk to sit down.

"Mr. Mortimer," she said, "I have been thinking of this for some time now, and I have decided that you deserve a rest. I am going to accept your resignation."

Mr. Mortimer did not understand. She put it to him again, coolly and clearly, and in words that could contain no other meaning. But still Mr. Mortimer did not understand. He scratched his head and clucked and sniffed and blinked at her in honest bewilderment. He said, "I'm obliged to you for considering me, ma'am. But I'm not so old as you appear to think, indeed no, I flatter myself, no ma'am. I have many years—yes—ah—I hope many years of useful service ahead of me. I have no intention of retiring."

"But I *wish* you to retire, Mr. Mortimer," she said.

"No, ma'am, thank ye, it's out of the question. What would I do with myself if I retired? And besides, what about Skene's, ma'am? Yes indeed, what would happen to Skene's if I was not here to supervise everything?" He shook his head, contemplating the awful possibilities. His mind was quite made up. "No no, I'll just carry on—continue—for another ten years—ha, ha, ha—perhaps twenty. Would that be all, ma'am?"

Thirza moistened her lips. "Mr. Mortimer, I don't think you understand. I am giving you notice. I am dispensing with your services as from the end of the month."

He sat motionless, his eyes wide.

"I appreciate all you've done for Skene's," she said quickly. "I know you have been a loyal and good servant of the firm, and despite our present financial difficulties I propose to retire you on half-pay. You will be paid half your present salary on the first of each month."

"But," Mortimer said, "I want to work."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Mortimer."

"But," Mortimer said, "I have years of work in me yet, ma'am."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Mortimer. My mind is made up."

"But," Mortimer said. He crumpled suddenly. His shoulders sagged, his hands dangled loosely in the V of his legs, and he slumped in his chair, a decrepit and hopeless old man, his eyes bleak and despairing. "But, ma'am, I *must* have work," he said.

"I tell you, half your salary will be paid as before on the first . . ."

"It's not the money, ma'am."

"Well, then," she said, "if you feel you would like to work elsewhere, I shall give you an excellent reference, of course. No doubt some other firm, perhaps the Moray Frith . . ."

Mortimer struggled to his feet, drew himself to his full height, gave her a look of burning contempt, and turned and shuffled out of the door. She lowered her face to her hands on the desk. She was thoroughly ashamed of herself. . . .

After a few minutes she rang for Mr. Donald.

"Mr. Donald," she said, "Mr. Mortimer is leaving us. I want you to take over his duties. Your salary will be the same as Mr. Mortimer's was, but in addition you will have, to start off, a commission of 2½ per cent. on all profits shown annually."

It was pleasing to hear Mr. Donald's professions of gratitude, but they did not wipe out the memory of that look from old Mortimer. She would have given a great deal not to have said such a cruel and unnecessary thing. However, what was done was done. There was no use crying over spilt milk. She bit her lip, dismissing the matter. "Well, then, Mr. Donald," she said. "The contract."

Half an hour later, they were still discussing the first rough draft of the contract when the sound for which she had been waiting penetrated from the outer office. It was an ominous sound. "Fishermen," she said sharply. She looked at Mr. Donald, her pupils large and black. "Open the door, Mr. Donald, and ask them to come in."

They came in and stood awkwardly, caps in hand, in the doorway, as if ashamed to step into the room. She noted with dismay that there were five of them, and that they were probably the five best fishermen she had—Doddie Mair, Tarry Bowie, Jim and Willie Gray, and Sivvy West. Where these men led the rest would follow. If this meant what she thought it did, she had failed miserably, and Skene's was as good as finished. She cleared her throat and said in a voice which was unusually loud and high, "Mr. Donald, get these gentlemen their contracts."

Mr. Donald did not move. She jerked a glance at him and saw that he was shaking his head. He was actually smiling. The fishermen were smiling too, sheepishly and slyly, as if they all shared a joke which only she did not see. Slowly, and with a wonderful sense of relief, she too began to smile.

"We jist came to tell ye," Doddie Mair said, "that we're with ye, lass, the maist o' us. We'll see ye have yer chance."

"Mr. Donald," she said, and she bent her head so that none of them might see her face and fumbled for what seemed an unnecessarily long time in the top drawer of her desk. "Mr. Donald, there's a time-honoured custom, I believe, for occasions like this. Take these keys and bring out a bottle of whisky."

(2)

The following morning the news was everywhere. The Fishertown seethed with speculation, and even in Kaysie folks stopped each other to ask if they had heard the latest.

Was it true that William Skene's widow meant to continue her late husband's business, actually meant to direct it herself? Could it be true? Could a woman set up as a curer? And had she actually devised and offered Skene's fishermen a new form of contract, a sort of *profit-sharing,* co-operative arrangement the like of which nobody had ever heard of before? And had she in as many words actually accused the Moray Frith Curing Company (the Moray Frith, mark you—Mr. Carmichael and the rest)—had she actually accused these respectable gentlemen of sharp practices and challenged them, as the story went, to a fight to the finish?

There had not been such a morsel in the district for months. The fisher-wives' tongues clacked at every other doorway. They were now among Thirza's bitterest enemies, and few had a good word to say of her. Their men were fairer. Discussing Thirza at their boats and nets and as they strode their eight paces on the braehead or on the quays, they at least gave her credit for her spirit, although most of them were of the opinion that little good would come of it. In the ship chandler's the clerks smacked their lips and asked all and sundry, "Weel, fit d'ye think o't?," and in the august professional offices of the ancient burgh of Kaysie itself the news sent a refreshing ripple of gossip across the placid surface of the

morning's routine. There was a pleasurable tension in the air which communicated itself to people who had no connection with the fishing. The issue was elemental. There was a fight brewing, and the ingredients were unusually spicy. The town simmered with excitement.

There were many callers at the White House that morning. They came on the flimsiest of business excuses and exercised a great deal of ingenuity in appearing casual and uninquisitive. Mr. Donald did not indulge their curiosity. He ignored their hints, and answered their direct questions with the expert evasiveness of a diplomat. Thirza was still less accommodating. She refused to see anyone at all, and even sent through a message to the Minister that she regretted she was too busy to receive him. Whisky Johnny was not to be dismissed in this cavalier fashion, however.

"In that case," he said, "I'll wait."

"Begging your pardon, Minister," Mr. Donald said, "you may have to wait all day."

"So be it," said Whisky Johnny. He sat down calmly on Mr. Donald's own chair, folded his hands on his stomach, and looked up with disarming humility at the perplexed young man. "I'm nae ower proud to wait," he said. "Jist tell her she'll fin' me here when she has a minute to spare."

Thirza, knowing her man, and fearing that he would sit all day and night if need be, found the minute forthwith. She was not comfortable in the Minister's presence. She had never lost her childhood fear of him and she felt that she never would. She offered him the arm-chair in her study with as good a grace as she could muster, but Whisky Johnny, to her irritation, flung a thick short leg over a corner of her big pedestal desk (an imitation of Richard Carmichael's) and, cocking his head on his shoulder, looked down on her with quizzical good humour. "Ye've nae cause to bar the door on me, Thirza," he said. "I'm nae here to criticise, but merely to counsel ye. I guessed a' along that this was in your mind, a' this magnificence"—he waved an arm that encompassed the room—"an' you sittin' at the top o' the table, monarch o' a' ye survey. Ye've aye had this proud and sinful notion o' gatherin' power to yoursel', an' I'm here the day nae to bang ma heid agin' a steen wa', but jist to remind ye in passin' o' certain ither prideful individuals—

Achitophel an' Hamann an' Nebuchadnezzar an' Belshazzar. . . ."

"And Hezekiah," she suggested.

"Ay, him an' all. I'm glad to see ye still ken your Book, though I hinna seen ye at the Kirk mair than once a Sunday for two or three weeks syne. Ay, Hezekiah and Moab as weel, ye ken fit happened to these high-falutin' gentry. 'By pride cometh contention,' Thirza. And thereafter ruin. Now I'm goin' to ask ye a question, as man to man, an' I want ye to answer it honestly. Would William 've approved?"

She was getting very tired of this question.

"No," she said. "I don't think he would."

"I ken he would not," the Minister said. "An' so do you. He would have disapproved very strongly indeed."

"William," she said, "was not necessarily always right. And I am not going to live my life only by the measure of what William would or would not have approved. I have no doubt it shocks you that I should say this so soon after William's death, but I must insist on my right to live my life according to my own lights. William was not a good businessman. There are many things besides my taking over the business of which William would not have approved, but which are necessary if Skene's is to survive; and it is important that Skene's should not only survive but prosper. It is important for the workpeople, for the whole Fishertown. . . ."

"And for you."

"Yes, for me too," she said. "But I am not thinking of myself at the moment. I am thinking of all the people who have been loyal to Skene's and to whom Skene's in turn owes a loyalty. Would you seriously advise me to knuckle under to the Moray Frith, to sell the business to these fine gentlemen whose only desire is to fleece the fisherfolk, who would bring poverty and ruin to the Fishertown, and set us all back twenty years to the times when three fisher-children out of every four died—of malnutrition, of starvation—in the first five years of their lives?"

"Ye're a braw hypocrite, Thirza," the Minister said.

She kept her temper with an effort.

"No, but seriously, is that what you'd like? Is that what you came to advise me to help bring about?"

"Nae exactly," the Minister said. "I came to sound ye out, an' to

gie ye a bit o' information. I hear the Moray Frith directors are meetin' this efterneen, to discuss fit they ca' 'their policy with regard to Skene's in the light of the new circumstances'—in ither words, to plan the prosecution o' the war agin ye. D'ye ken fit ye're lettin' yersel' in for, Thirza?"

"I think so," she said. "It's a fight to the finish, and given just a little luck, I think I can win it."

The Minister nodded gravely. "As your speeritural adviser I canna commend your attitude, but as a mortal man wi' a' the faults and vanities o' mankind, I'm wi' ye, Thirza, an' if there's onything I can ever dee to help, I'll dee't, an' gladly. I've never been able to thole they gentry at the Moray Frith, and though I ken fine that your motives are sinfu', your purpose is guid. I'll back ye, lassie, as best as I can."

She was very pleased. There was probably not a great deal that the Minister could do to help, but she was in desperate need of friends and allies, and here was one from a most unexpected quarter. She made some formal and altogether incomplete expression of her gratitude and accompanied Whisky Johnny to the front door. As he was taking his leave of her he clapped her hand. "Dinna be losin' sleep," he said, "ower fit folks may be sayin' aboot ye, and dinna be feart to tak' your troubles to the Lord. He's confounded a lot waur an' bigger enemies nor yours in His time, an' He'll listen sympathetically to a' ye have to say—which is mair nor He'll dee for the Moray Frith billies."

"You don't like them," she said smiling. "Do you?"

"I like a' God's creatures," Whisky Johnny said, and his eyes gleamed with humour. "But d'ye ken this, Thirza: there's nae ene o' them but gangs to the Auld Kirk."

Yes, she needed friends badly. The situation worsened daily, for each day made fresh inroads on her capital. The Irish market had long been flooded with the herrings which, in normal times, would have gone to the Baltic, and now you could not give herrings away to the Irish. The West Indian market was worse, for there herrings had become so cheap and plentiful that the importers would not pay even their freight, and certain of the more prosperous firms, like the Moray Frith, were squeezing out old-established but less wealthy rivals by sending their surplus herrings free of charge,

actually delivering them at their own expense free of all cost in West Indian warehouses—all for the sake of "goodwill." The same policy was being adopted in Britain with a view to popularising the cured herring, but without much success. The British housewife had a stubborn prejudice against receiving her herring out of a barrel. She was willing to eat a fresh herring—provided she got it cheap enough—but no salesman could convince her that the cured herring was fit for human consumption. When the curers presented the retailers with cured herrings free of charge and the retailers offered the herrings at the nominal price of a halfpenny a dozen, this merely convinced the housewife of her suspicions: the cured herring was only fit for cat's meat.

It was not only Skene's that felt the pinch that year. All round the coast the curing yards were stacked with barrel upon barrel of unmarketable herrings, and in the *Curing Times* there were weekly notices of curing businesses for sale, and sometimes, more ominously, accounts of legal proceedings against curers. Everywhere curing firms were cutting costs to a minimum, reducing overheads, slashing staffs, holding on grimly on a day-to-day basis, and hoping against hope for the raising of the blockade.

For Thirza the situation had ceased to be serious and was now critical. She had cut her expenses to the lowest possible figure in all save one respect, but this one item, listed under the comprehensive term "Fishermen," was by far the highest on her expense sheet, and could not now be reduced without destroying the uneasy balance of confidence she had restored in her fishermen. She was conscious day after day of the increasing falsity of her position. When George Bruce came in to ask her for a chit for six new nets because the dogs had been at him last night, or when Willie Mair airily informed her that he had chalked up a new masthead light at the chandler's because the "auld een widna haud oot win' or watter," or when Andra Gall wanted to repaint the "*Fidelity for Ever and a Day*," or when this one or that one wanted new lateens or new floats or new rowlocks or new hawsers or any of the hundred-and-one things that her fishermen were always demanding, she was aware that she ought to read the riot act and inform them in no uncertain manner that these expenses were nearly always unnecessary and often downright frivolous, and that mean-

time Skene's could not afford the luxury of maintaining boats in perfect condition. She could not refuse them, however. She knew the fishermen's logic too well. They would argue that if Skene's couldna afford a wee bittie twine or a splash o' paint for the beloved *Sarah Ann* or the *Eternal Quest,* Skene's must surely be in a bad way; and so, although mildly counselling frugality, she generally gave in to her fishermen's requests.

But afterwards, as she scored another precious few shillings off her credit tally, she would sometimes bury her face in chagrin in her hands and wonder where it was all going to end.

And then came the miracle. It was the miracle for which she had prayed.

On the morning of October 14 a batch of mail was delivered to her. Included in it was the following letter, inscribed in a careful and unfamiliar schoolboy hand:

"MADAM,—

"Your business has been transacted. The price obtained averaged £98 per unit.

"I am lying in Aberdeen for repairs, and shall proceed to Kaysie the week after next.

"I have the honour to be,

"Madam,

"Your Obedient Servant,

"D. V. STULLEN."

She jumped to her feet, held the letter close to her face, and read it again. "Mr. Donald!" she screamed. "Mr. Donald!"

Mr. Adam's face, startled but inquisitive, appeared in the doorway. "Is anything the matter, ma'am?"

"No, no, no," she said, panting, radiant. "Donald. Where's Mr. Donald?"

"He's down at the yard, ma'am. Remember? . . ."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, of course." She threw back her head and laughed aloud, and then, cutting off the laugh abruptly, she darted past the astonished Mr. Adam, clutching her skirts in one hand and the letter in the other, and, brandishing both, raced down the corridor. "Manson!" she called at the pitch of her voice. "Manson!"

She tore through the public rooms, collided with the Dominie, who had been brought to live in the White House only the previous week, and deliberately and mischievously ruffled his hair. She raced upstairs, giggling.

"Manson! Manson! Manson, where are you?"

She located the housekeeper at last in the bathroom, and hammered so frenziedly on the door that Manson did not stand on her modesty and, half undressed and in great alarm, unbolted the door and pulled it open. Thirza fell into her bosom. "Manson, Manson, read this!"

"Fit on earth? . . ."

"Read it, Manson. Read it!"

"I hinna a han' to read wi'. Can ye nae see I'm just huddin' masel' thegither."

"Well, I'll read it to you. Listen. Oh, listen to this, Manson!" She read it aloud. "Ninety-eight pounds! *Ninety-eight pounds!* What do you think of that?"

"I dinna ken. Fit's it a' aboot? Fit's a unit?"

"A unit, my dear Manson," Thirza sang. "A unit is a barrel of herrings."

"And foo much did ye say ye've got for a barrel?"

"Ninety-eight pounds, no less. Oh, blessed unit! Blessed barrel! Blessed herrings! Manson, we're saved! Blessed Captain Stullen even! Don't just stand there glowering, then. Don't you understand, Skene's is saved, we can snap our fingers at the Moray Frith, we're rich again, we've made a fortune, we're saved. Oh, Manson, isn't it wonderful!" She threw the letter up in the air, clutched the housekeeper by the waist, and waltzed her round and round.

"Leave me!" Manson fussed. "Leave me, will ye. Look fit ye're deein'. My clays. They're fa'in affa me like leaves. Ye're dementit, lassie. Ye'll hae me stark stripped naked."

"Oh God," Thirza said. "Oh God!" She pressed herself fiercely into the squelchy bosom, and planted a passionate kiss on Manson's bare shoulder. She was dizzy with relief. "Skene's is saved," she sang. "Saved!" And then she sat down quite suddenly on the bathroom floor amid the flotsam of Manson's clothing, buried her face in her hands, and wept as if her heart was breaking.

CHAPTER III

(1)

THE MONEY WAS PAID OVER to Mr. Donald and was duly banked in a new branch of the North of Scotland Bank in Aberdeen. Thirza wrote to Captain Stullen congratulating him on his great success, and at the same time informing him politely but categorically that she did not intend to receive him. He did not reply, and for some days she went in fear of an incident.

Once, when driving down the High Street, she saw him watching her from the doorway of the *Black Bull,* and on another occasion, when leaving the Chandler's shop on the Shore, she met him face to face; but, to her great relief, he allowed her to sweep by without appearing to recognise her. She was pleasantly surprised at his discretion. But she was also puzzled, and a little uneasy.

She did not allow herself ever to think of the incident aboard the *Foolish Virgin,* yet whenever she looked from her window in the White House and saw the black hull and high masts of the clipper ship, she was reminded, in spite of herself, of the dreadful thing that had happened to her on board that ship, and it required an effort of will, several times a day, to apply the brakes to her memory. At night, she had no such control. She frequently dreamed of Captain Stullen and of his cabin, and she would awake mortified and distressed—sometimes even in tears. And then, as a matter of course, she would become angry. Angry with Captain Stullen and, most of all, angry with herself.

Three weeks passed. The *Foolish Virgin* continued to lie to the tide in the Bay, and her crew, accepted now almost as townsfolk, walked the streets by day and cavorted nightly in the *Black Bull.* Nothing untoward happened. Captain Stullen made no attempt to see her, and Thirza began to feel that her fears were groundless, and that Stullen had no further demands to make of her. She had an idea that she had to thank Deborah Carnie for this, yet she was quite unable to feel grateful.

Deborah was the widow of Bill Carnie, a Moray Frith fisherman drowned in one of the Moray Frith's unseaworthy boats in the gale of 1859. She was a Stonehaven girl, a flaxen-haired blonde, in her early thirties, big in every sense of the word, with strong peasant limbs and breasts as buoyant as herring-floats. She had been considered forward when Bill Carnie first brought her home as a bride, but after a few years her comprehensive friendliness and her easy-going ways had won the neighbours over, and she had been accepted as a respectable member of the community. Until Captain Stullen came. Then people began to notice a thing or two, particularly with regard to Deborah's washing, and in the space of time it takes one woman to speak to another in strictest confidence, Deborah Carnie's reputation was gone.

Deborah bore the loss with resignation. She remained the same easy-going, obliging, and untidy creature that she had always been. She wore none of the expensive trinkets that Captain Stullen was reputed to have loaded on her, and although it was an open secret that she was now a woman of wealth and owned underclothes of an indescribable splendour, she continued to live (during the day) in the same frugal and industrious way as ever, and on a fine afternoon might be seen sitting on her doorstep, her hair all over the place and her mutch the worse for wear, plying her needle and palm in calloused hands as she worked on her father-in-law's sails. She was clearly lost to all sense of shame, and even those who were least self-righteous and who would have been glad to forgive her were affronted by her plain assumption that there was nothing for them to forgive.

Thirza listened in bewilderment to the tales about Deborah Carnie and Captain Stullen. She could not understand them. She had always regarded Deborah as a middle-aged woman, and she could not for the life of her imagine what any man, let alone a man of Captain Stullen's experience, could possibly see in her. She was puzzled at first, and then bitterly angry. She told herself repeatedly that it was a matter of indifference to her with whom Captain Stullen chose to associate; nevertheless, she felt it to be a very great insult that he should make no attempt to see her and should choose to console himself instead with a woman of Deborah's years and proportions. It did not fail to occur to her that Deborah might have

charms which she had not noticed, and on two or three occasions she went out of her way to drive past Deborah's house. She saw Deborah twice, but was none the wiser. The blonde was even larger and grosser than she had remembered.

The only other explanation was so distasteful that she preferred not to consider it. But it found its way into her thoughts in spite of herself. Could it be that in these hateful and never-to-be-recalled moments Captain Stullen had found her, Thirza, unsatisfactory? Was there a degree of prowess in such matters for the woman as well as for the man? She ventured on such questions reluctantly, and then only in the dark and closeted privacy of her bed. She knew very well that these were sinful questions, and when she explored them she was always gratified to note that her face burned with shame. And it burned most fiercely of all at the thought that Captain Stullen had perhaps found her inadequate for his purposes. That cut her to the very quick.

One morning in 1865, not a month after Captain Stullen's return to Kaysie, Thirza noticed that the *Foolish Virgin* was missing from her usual berth. She applied her eye to the telescope, diligently searching the farther reaches of the Bay. There was no sign of the *Foolish Virgin,* no patch of distant sail that could possibly be hers. Thirza was greatly relieved. But later in the day, when she ventured to mention to Mr. Donald that "the ship" (she never named it) was gone, she was discomfited to be told: "Yes'm, and they say Deborah Carnie's gone with it."

"Mr. Donald," she said, chin up, the prim and perfect lady, "be good enough never to mention that woman's name in my presence."

(2)

The success of Stullen's coup went to Thirza's head. She became convinced that she had the Midas touch, and she began to make long-term plans for Skene's which would have seemed fantastic to her late husband and which seemed improbable even to the ambitious and venturesome Mr. Donald. Thirza did not allow him or anyone else to discourage her. She had arguments at hand, complete with unanswerable facts and figures, to prove beyond all peradventure that every one of her schemes was a practical proposition, and that there was no reason on earth why Skene's should not have new

kilns and fish-houses, a sail-making loft, a ropery, and even, in due course, a shipbuilding yard. There was no limit to her ambitions. She had tasted success and was greedy for more. She was no longer satisfied to hold her own against the Moray Frith Curing Company. She was out to smash it.

During the whole of that year she continued to strengthen her position. The managers of the Moray Frith, still awaiting her collapse, were strangely quiescent, and she was able to complete the reorganisation of Skene's business to her own requirements. This consisted, for the most part, in a greatly curtailed expense sheet. She was prepared to reduce everywhere in quality for the sake of profits. She dreamed of the time when she would be able to carry the fight to the Moray Frith, but meantime she must have security. More and more money. All her immediate plans were directed towards the one aim of making money. She would know no peace until she had amassed a fighting fund.

In two years she was guilty of only one breach of economy, and she was able to excuse this on the grounds that William would have liked it. . . .

One day in spring she had an unexpected caller—a handsome woman in her early thirties, a big, robust woman with strong features in a pock-marked face. Thirza recognised her as Jessie Mortimer—Mortimer's youngest and only unmarried daughter.

"It's aboot ma father," Jessie said.

Thirza nodded warily. "I thought it would be. I hope he's well."

"That's jist fit he's nae." Jessie stood rigidly to attention by the side of Thirza's desk. She was very ill at ease, and when she spoke it was in a short, sharp shout. "He's nae weel ava."

"What's the matter?"

"He's pinin'. Thirza—I mean Mistress Gare—could ye nae tak' him back? If ye dinna tak' him back he'll dee. I ken he will. He's nae eatin'. He's nae sleepin'. He's aye been a great reader. ' 'Gin I retire,' he used to say, 'I'll read day an' nicht.' So my sister Maggie, that's her that's merried to Maister Broon as clerks wi' Brodie, she tak's alang a great heap o' buiks, f'ae her Joe—I mean Maister Broon—he's a great reader an' a'. 'There noo, Dada,' she says, 'there's some buiks for ye, as guid as ye can get.' An' she pit them on the table by his bed, an' my Dada jist turned his face to the

wa' and never even looked at the buiks. 'Ah weel,' my sister says, 'we'll jist leave them there, like, an' he'll come roun' to them.' But nae him. There's nae een o' they buiks he's laid a finger on, and yesterday mornin' he says to me, 'Tell your sister to tak' those damned buiks awa' or I'll pit them in the fire.' I got the doctor in til him at the hin' end o' last week, that's Dr. Grant, he hisna been in the hoose since ma mither deed—weel, I telt the doctor a' I kent, and the doctor inspeckit my dad real thorough, and d'ye ken fit he said? 'There's nae a thing wrong wi' him,' he said, 'except that he's deein'.'

"'But fit's he deein' o', Doctor?' I speired.

"'He's deein' o' retirement,' the Doctor said, 'same as mony anither hard-workin' auld billie afore him. Ye want to save his life ye gie him some wark, some guid hard wark to dee.'

"But he winna wark. He winna even get oot o' his bed and he winna tak' his food. Mistress Gare, will ye nae tak' him back? I'm nae askin' ye to tak' him back as heid clerk, but could ye nae jist fin' him a wee jobbie that would keep him occupied?"

Thirza shook her head. This glimpse into Mortimer's private life was painful and illuminating. It dismayed her to realise that there were people who called Mortimer "Dada," who regarded him as the pivot round which their world revolved.

"Ye couldna possible?"

"Not possibly," she said. She was steeled for a scene, but Jessie Mortimer merely bit her lip, and without another word turned and went out, closing the door carefully behind her.

All that week Thirza brooded, probing her conscience and carrying her uneasiness over from day to day. She could not forget Jessie Mortimer's distress, and, still less, her dignity. She kept remembering the quiet and careful way that Jessie had closed the door. . . .

On Saturday afternoon she summoned Alicky Mac after lunch and drove to Mortimer's house, situated in one of the streets off the School Brae. There were several of these streets, and they were all as similar as the cross-bones of a herring—narrow streets of humble two-roomed houses, each house end on to the next and facing the sea, each scrupulously clean and distinguished from its neighbour only by the colour of its curtains or the size of its window plant-

Thirza's carriage, squeezing the bairns off the road, forcing them to press their bodies against the house doors, was an event to be noted and recalled, and a goodly number of neighbours saw Alicky Mac hand her down to the pavement and watched her compress her skirts to enable her to negotiate the Mortimers' doorway.

Jessie Mortimer, a dust-cap on her head, welcomed her joyfully, "I thocht ye'd come," she said. "Ye'll be wantin' to see him," and she immediately led the way into the living-room, where Mortimer, in a large bed built like a ship's bunk into an alcove, lay plainly awake and rigid, his face to the wall.

"Dada," Jessie said, her voice fluttering. "Here she is to see ye, Mistress Skene hersel'."

Mortimer did not move.

"I'm sorry to find that you're not well, Mr. Mortimer," Thirza said. "I hope it's not serious. . . ."

"Na na, there's naething the maitter wi' him," his daughter said.

"I've been wondering," Thirza said, addressing the dishevelled back of Mortimer's head and determined to get it over and done with as soon as possible . . . "I came to ask you a favour. I find that we are getting in arrears with the office work, and I would really be very much obliged if you would come back and help us. I would like you to be the—ah—the—ah—Chief Accountant. This will, of course, be a very responsible post, and will entail almost as much (she relented)—in fact the same salary as you received as head clerk. Will you come back, Mr. Mortimer?"

Still he did not reply. He had not moved a muscle, and she had no means of knowing whether he had heard or understood. She moistened her lips. "Skene's needs you, Mr. Mortimer. We're all very anxious to have you back. Perhaps you could begin next week?"

Mortimer neither spoke nor moved, and his daughter, all smiles, took Thirza by the arm. "In course he'll come back," she said. "He'll be there come Monday mornin' at the usual time, and thank ye, Mistress Skene, thank ye richt kindly, ma'am. Ye'll nivver regret this."

"Good-bye then, Mr. Mortimer," Thirza said. She gladly allowed herself to be piloted to the front door.

"He hisna spoken for two days," his daughter said. "I'm richt

sorry his treatin' ye like this, and you sae kind to him an' a', but he'll be aricht, I'm sure he'll be his ain sel' again noo."

"Jessie!" Mortimer's voice filtered out to them at the open door, high-pitched and quavery, but unquestionably triumphant. "I told you. Didn't I tell you they couldn't do without me! Skene's can't do without me."

"Hush, Dada," Jessie called, flustered. "Hush, hush!"

"Simple fact," Mortimer shouted. "Can't do without me. Even that fule of a woman knows it now."

(3)

In February of that year the Baltic was once again opened to shipping. There was great jubilation along the coasts of Scotland. The bells were tolled; there were holidays and thanksgiving meetings, dances, concerts, even bonfires and firework displays. Thirza, still in mourning, was unable to take part in these festivities, but for a month she went twice each Sunday to the Kirk, and, after much discussion with Manson, donated five guineas to the Africa Mission Fund.

It was a year to be remembered. The fishing was good, and the people of the Baltic, starved of herrings, were eager to take all that the Scottish curers could export and to pay a good price even for indifferent-quality fish. At the end of the season Thirza's books showed the biggest profit that Skene's had achieved in twelve years. She took this to be proof of her business acumen, and the following year plunged recklessly and confidently into disaster.

The expense which she most grudged was freight, and she had dreams of the days when Skene's herrings would be carried in Skene's own ships. Meantime, she must charter her ships, and in the close season she sent Mr. Donald to Aberdeen and to Leith to investigate the shipping position. As a result of Mr. Donald's investigations—and expressly against Mr. Donald's advice—she entered into an agreement, at absurdly cut rates, with a Mr. MacIntosh of Aberdeen, the owner of an ancient, Lascar-manned schooner, the *Cherokee Girl*.

When the *Cherokee Girl* came to Kaysie to load up her large cargo of earlies for Hamburg, the harbour-master, the foreman cooper, and several of Thirza's elder fishermen all questioned the

advisability of chartering so old and unseaworthy a vessel, but Thirza, thinking only of the very favourable rates she had forced on Mr. MacIntosh, assured them that she knew what she was about and totally ignored their warnings.

She had worries enough without heeding such old wives' tales, for the directors of the Moray Frith had at last decided that she was an enemy worthy of respect, and were subjecting her to a novel and dangerous persecution.

Since the beginning of the season her fishermen's nets had been systematically fouled by a large Dutch herring-buss, and her losses were already so considerable that the whole year's fishing now hung in the balance. Thirza had done all she could to defend herself. She had—of necessity—guaranteed to replace her fishermen's nets free of charge, and she had reported the Dutchman's illegal conduct to the Fishery Officer, the Coastguard, the Provost, the Member of Parliament, and the Fishery Board in Edinburgh.

The Fishery Board had replied coolly that it was in touch with its local officer on the matter; the Member of Parliament wrote a sympathetic letter (signed by his secretary) expressing concern and assuring her (1) of his intention to raise the matter in the next session of Parliament if the opportunity arose, and (2) of his unfailing interest in all matters that concerned his constituents; the Provost suggested warily that it was a matter for the Coastguard; the Coastguard declared that it was investigating her charges, and would communicate with her on the subject at a later date; and the Fishery Officer, an ancient enemy, said in his bland Highland way when accosted in the yard: "It iss peculiar, iss it not, that yours are the only nets to have suffered this alleged damage?"

"It is more than peculiar," Thirza said hotly. "It is significant."

"And what might you mean by that, Mistress Skene?"

"You know very well what I mean. This is a deliberate attempt to intimidate my fishermen. Ever since this Dutch buss appeared off the coast, the Moray Frith boats have been using a code—showing coloured masthead lights when their nets are down. Green one night; green above red another night; red above orange another."

"Are you insinuating? . . ."

"I'm stating fact," she said. "Though I have no doubt it is not a fact that has appeared in your report to the Fishery Board. The

Moray Frith fishermen are being instructed in certain light signals, different each night, which they flash at any ship which appears to be in danger of bearing down on them. I would have to be a very great fool not to understand precisely what is happening."

"I presume," Mr. McEwan said, "that you have reported this to the Coastguard?"

"Of course I've reported it," she said. "And the immediate result, as you probably know, was that the Lieutenant had dinner at Carmichael House that same evening."

"I have every confidence in Lieutenant Auchinachie," the Fishery Officer said. "I feel sure that if your allegations are correct, Lieutenant Auchinachie will waste no time in bringing justice to bear, although, mark you, Mistress Skene, this is a matter of international importance and cannot be proceeded with in an impetuous way."

She could have slapped his smug face.

It was the same everywhere she turned. Even her friends—even John MacPherson—seemed to think that she was letting her imagination run riot, and, despite her protests, he published a batch of letters, which she knew to be inspired by the Moray Frith, in which much play was made of the dogfish shoals off the coast, and of the damage they were causing to nets. Meantime, while the Coastguard continued its so-called investigations, she was losing nets by the score and fish with the nets, and her fishermen as well as herself were losing money that neither she nor they could afford in a season when they ought to be growing rich.

In her agitation she had repeatedly overstated her case against the Moray Frith. She had been indiscreet. And now her indiscretion was coming home to roost. People who might ordinarily have shown sympathy were embarrassed by her vehemence, and, convinced that she had a bee in her bonnet, took no steps to arouse public opinion against the authorities. And so day after day her losses continued and mounted, and no one but herself and her fishermen seemed to care.

It was against this background of worry that the *Cherokee Girl,* almost unnoticed by Thirza, sailed from Kaysie bound for Hamburg with a large cargo of earlies on June 24.

Eight days later the news reached Thirza by express letter that

the *Cherokee Girl* had foundered in calm weather in St. Andrews Bay. "You will no doubt be glad to learn," the owner wrote, "that there was no loss of life."

It was a bitter moment, the bitterest she had yet known.

She rushed with it to her bedroom, locked her door, and flung herself on the bed. She remembered all the advice she had rejected, all the signs and portents of disaster that she had missed. Too late, she saw it all now. For the first time since she had taken control of Skene's, she doubted her own capacity and her judgment. She was humiliated and desperately unhappy, and in her misery she cried aloud for William, and informed her damp pillow that if only William had been alive none of this would have happened.

After a little she sat up, turned the pillow, and dried her eyes. This was no time for weakness. Bankruptcy, once again, hovered over her, and only desperate action could save the business. In less than an hour, she was back at her desk, her face repaired with eau-de-Cologne and rose-water. She dealt briskly with her routine work, consulted her ledgers to ascertain the precise extent of her loss, took stock of her situation, and came to a desperate decision.

In the afternoon she dressed with great care, ordered out Alicky Mac and the chaise, and drove to the bank.

Mr. Craven, the bank manager, inclined his head as she was shown into his private room, but did not stand up. He was a large and imposing man in early middle-age, clean-shaven, with watchful brown eyes set close together in a large and smooth pink face. He was dressed immaculately in the fashion of an earlier day. He wore a navy coat with a high velvet collar, a high-waisted Marcella waistcoat, a monstrous black cravat, and elastic cloth pantaloons strapped under his shoes. Arranged on the clothes stand behind his door was the swoop-brimmed topper, frogged and braided forck-coat, and ornamented Sarawak cane which he affected outdoors. He had realised early in life that he was a man of great presence and had sensibly decided to make the most of it. He had learned that his appearance was of service to him only when he held his tongue, and so he had made a weapon of silence. He had no need to be suave, for his was the only bank in town. He was the banker. He folded his hands, on each of which he wore an identical signet ring, and nodded Thirza into a chair.

Thirza stated her case. She wanted a substantial loan—an advance—and she proposed to offer her current business credits as security. She had the papers to confirm her statements, but first she listed the items verbally. There were eleven in all, and her recital was comprehensive and assuring. She could not doubt that she had put her case well, for, listening to her own formidable arguments, she had all but convinced herself that her financial position was sound, would certainly have succeeded in convincing herself had she not known that Item 8, by far the largest credit of all, a cargo of earlies for Hamburg, was lying at this minute at the bottom of the sea in St. Andrews Bay.

The banker heard her out, his chin sunk mouth deep into his cravat, his eyes down but lifting occasionally to strike shrewdly at her face. He had not opened his mouth since she entered, but now, as she finished talking and shuffled her papers preparatory to laying them on his desk, he said, "Unnecessary."

"But surely," Thirza said, "you'll need to see the security?"

He said, "Only if I were to grant the—advance, I think ye called it."

They looked into each other's eyes.

"Mr. Craven," Thirza said, "I'm in urgent need of the money to carry on my business. Such slight financial embarrassment as I am suffering is temporary only. . . ." She fancied that he nodded, and regarding this from so monumental a man as real encouragement, she rushed on impetuously. "If you'll just examine these papers you'll see that Skene's position is basically sound. The money is there in plenty on paper, and when the returns come in from my consignees . . ."

"Ay," said Mr. Craven. "Ay, there's the rub."

"It's all here," she said, tapping her documents, "in black and white. You can check on all my statements. I assure you, Mr. Craven, you won't be running any risk. Skene's has banked with you almost as long as there's been a bank in Kaysie. You know our reputation. . . ."

"I knew your late husband's reputation," Mr. Craven said. "But alas, he is with us no longer."

"If he was," Thirza said, nettled, "things would not have come to this pass. The Moray Frith would not dare to treat me as they

have been doing. They would not dare openly to intimidate my fishermen, to run down my nets, to connive and conspire against me at every turn." Momentarily, she was the helpless widow again. She had a lump in her throat. She honestly believed that she was a poor, defenceless woman—alone, all alone in a world of hostile men. She was extremely sorry for herself. She raised agonised eyes to the banker. "Won't you help me, Mr. Craven? You must know that it's not through any fault of my own that I find myself in this unfortunate position. If I could just have even three months' grace . . ."

"Yes, I'll help you," Mr. Craven said unexpectedly. "I'll give you some advice, ma'am." And he disengaged his hands sufficiently to give his thumbs twiddling room. "And my advice is this. Sell out while you have the chance. Your business is worthless. I cannot advance you money on the security of a failing business. Your papers can tell me nothing of consequence that I don't know already. I've been looking into your figures from time to time, and I don't like them, Mistress Skene. I don't like them at all. You're not capable of conducting a curing business. It's a man's work. You're a woman, and your place is at home. Sell out while you can still get a price. According to my information the offer the Moray Frith made you was a very fair one, even a generous one. Take that offer. Cut your losses and sell out now. That's my considered advice, and that advice is the best help I can give you."

It might have been Richard Carmichael speaking. She controlled herself with an effort. She was in no position to speak her mind. She knew now that there was precious little chance of shifting the banker, but no matter how remote the chance, she had to try it. "Remember," she said, her voice trembling very slightly, "I came to you a year ago, Mr. Craven, nearly two years ago, shortly after my husband's death, and asked you to advance me some money. You wouldn't do it. You said then that my business wouldn't last the summer. Well, you were wrong. My business not only lasted, it thrived. And you're wrong again. Skene's is in a healthy position, Mr. Craven, and these papers will prove it to you. If you'll just have a look. . . ."

Mr. Craven smiled and shook his head.

"But why won't you?"

"Because, madam, I know very well that you're bankrupt. And I know too that your papers, however accurate they may be in other respects, will not be up to date on the most important point of all. They are not likely to show the loss of your latest cargo."

She sat up with a jerk.

"The *Cherokee Girl*," the banker said. He unlocked his fingers and ran one set of finger-tips delicately along the line of his jaw. "I have presumed that it is because of the loss of the *Cherokee Girl* that you have come to see me."

"But," Thirza said, gaping, "but I only heard of it myself to-day. How did you—how could you possibly have known?"

"We bankers have means of learning such things."

She had never felt so small and helpless, so humbled, so apprehensive. The power of the Moray Frith had never seemed so great.

They knew. They knew everything.

And the banker did not even trouble to conceal his knowledge. She could see that he cared nothing for her, regarded her as insignificant, was careless of what he gave away to her.

How *could* he know? She had told no one—not even Mr. Donald. And the news had come to her by express. Was it possible—could it be that the Moray Frith had had a hand in this catastrophe, had perhaps arranged it as they had arranged so many of her other misfortunes? The answer was immediate and undeniable. It *was* possible. It was even likely.

She flushed a bright angry red.

Of course. An old ship. A disreputable firm. A word from the Moray Frith. A promise of adequate compensation.

Fool that she had been. Fool, oh fool, inexperienced fool, with her dreams of getting rich quickly! . . . And this man, this banker, this odious man had known all along that the *Cherokee Girl* was at the bottom of the sea. He had played with her across his desk as a cat plays with a mouse, and then, tiring of the play, he had pounced. He had said, "I have presumed that it is because of the loss of the *Cherokee Girl* that you have come to me. . . ."

She sat seething with humiliation, unable to raise her face. She said in a low voice, "I'm just . . . wasting your time, then?"

"Yes."

She got up, trembling. With an attempt at dignity she raised her

head high. "If *you* will not advance me this money," she said, "I at least shall be able to get it elsewhere. I know that the Bank of Scotland in Aberdeen will be only too glad to assist me."

Mr. Craven smiled. "The Aberdeen manager is a very good friend of mine. I must post him—er—ah—recommending you."

Defeated again, she swept from the bank. But in that last brush, she had recovered something of her poise. She reminded herself that she was not beaten yet. She had always known that the bank, for all practical purposes, belonged to Richard Carmichael. She had expected nothing from Mr. Craven, and therefore had no cause to be disappointed.

She stepped into her carriage and nodded to Alicky Mac as he made to close the door. "The Suckie Moor," she said "And drive slowly." She had found that she could think very clearly when driving, and she had a great deal to think about now. Mr. Craven had made a mistake. He ought not to have told her that he knew of the loss of the *Cherokee Girl*. She was convinced that this was a blunder, and though she could not yet see how to turn it to her advantage, she had no doubt that there was a way, and that sooner or later she would find it. There might even be some chance of proving that the *Cherokee Girl* had been wrecked deliberately, and, more important still, that the Moray Frith had been implicated in the fraud. She would send Mr. Donald to Aberdeen to investigate. . . .

But meantime, first and foremost, was the problem of money. She could raise a mortgage on the White House. She could do that quite simply through an Aberdeen or an Edinburgh bank. How much would she get? Enough to tide her over for a few weeks, enough to enable her to replace a few more hundred nets. But what use would that be? When the weeks were up and the new nets destroyed, she would be back in the same hopeless position. No, money wasn't the answer. She needed money badly, but she needed even more to put an end to the wholesale destruction of her nets. That was the first essential. As long as her nets were being destroyed there was not, and could not be, any hope of prosperity for Skene's, Somehow—somehow she must devise a way. . . .

She drove for over an hour, leaning back in a corner of the chaise, her eyes closed, her face so serene that anyone seeing her might have thought her peacefully asleep. But every now and again she

stirred, and her eyes, opening briefly, gleamed like cat's eyes in her dim corner. After they had driven for seven or eight miles she ordered the chaise to be turned for home. "And drive fast!" she said. During the drive she knocked repeatedly on the glass partition. "Faster!" she called. "Faster!"

(4)

The following day Thirza sent for Mr. Craig of the Moray Frith.

She had never met Mr. Craig, but she knew a good deal about him. Ever since she had taken over Skene's she had had Mr. Donald keep a dossier on the Moray Frith, and this contained, in addition to all known particulars of the firm's business transactions, life-histories of the more important employees. The entry under the name Craig read as follows:

"CRAIG, *James. Joint manager of the Moray Frith Curing Co., born Aberdeen* 1821, *believed to be of humble birth, although particulars of parents unknown. Served apprenticeship as cooper with Aberdeen Trawling Company, with whom his maternal uncle, Adam Barclay, was a foreman rigger. Cooper with Milton, Fraserburgh,* 1840–46. *Foreman cooper Mathie, Peterhead,* 1846–55. *Concerned in scandal with Matilda Flett, landlady, with whom accused of being intimate while husband, fisherman, at sea. Brought action against Alex Flett, fisherman, husband of aforementioned M. Flett, for assault and battery Peterhead Court, September* 18, 1856. *Uncle (Adam Barclay) deceased* 1857, *leaving estate valued £*348, *etc., to James Craig. Left Mathie and set up curing business on own account Buckie* 1858. *Successful for two seasons. Bankrupted in the bad dogfish season* 1861. *Paid* 16*s. in the pound. Highly spoken of in Buckie. Considerate to employees, regular churchgoer. Attended choral and debating societies. Not an abstainer, but temperate in his habits. No further trace until* 1863, *when appointed yard manager to Moray Frith Curing Co. (Believed to have been abroad.) Appointed joint manager with J. G. Robertson (see entry under Robertson) on decease of then manager, Albert Steven, March* 1864. *Resides with Mrs. Massie,* 14, *Church Lane, Kaysie. Well regarded. Dresses carefully and talks like a gentleman. Never mentions humble background. Enjoys female society, and is extremely cour-*

teous to the opposite sex. Ambitious. Said to be looking for wealthy widow (!). Has commendable baritone voice, member of Auld Kirk choir, has sung Elijah at oratorios. Hobbies: musical soirées, home carpentry, walking. Usual walk, cliff path beyond Fishertown. Three sisters in Aberdeen, older, all married, all reasonably prosperous. No other known relatives. Extremely efficient in yard. Known as 'Nosie' among Moray Frith employees owing to length of nose."

Thirza received Mr. Craig in the intimate little parlour adjoining the office. She wore her favourite costume—a black velvet dress, decorous and yet revealing, with long unbroken lines along which the eye slipped unchecked. Her appearance at this time was a secret delight to her. Despite all her work and worry, she had not lost weight. On the contrary, her figure had recently become so markedly feminine that it could at last stand the constraint of whalebone. It was now unquestionably an adult and womanly figure, and only a girl who has gone without in a time of plenty can understand the pride with which Thirza privately regarded her fashionable contours, the confidence which her tight and proper corsetry gave her, and the pleasure with which she made certain small movements to show her new charms to advantage. Mr. Craig could not but be aware that his hostess was wearing a very pretty black dress and a most delicate and delightful perfume. And this was not all. For, beyond the region of Mr. Craig's ken, she was sleekly encased in her very nicest underclothes. She could not, in her person, have done him more honour. She was determined to impress.

She was very gracious to Mr. Craig, and Mr. Craig, in return, was so gracious to her that she could not help thinking that without her dossier she would never have known that the man was really only a cooper. It gave her confidence to keep reminding herself of his humble origins—she had quite forgotten her own—and she found no difficulty, therefore, in treating him with just that touch of condescension which they both thought proper in a lady. They drank a dish of tea together, complimented each other on their businesses, and aired guarded (and similar) opinions on local affairs. Then, the ice broken, Thirza, confident that she had taken the measure of her man, came straight to the point.

"Mr. Craig," she said earnestly, "I want to speak to you very frankly. I want your help."

"Madam," Mr. Craig said with equal earnestness, "if there is any way in which I can be of service you have only to inform me of it."

So far so good. She bit her lip with engaging indecision. "It's about my nets," she said at last. "I've been losing my nets at an alarming rate. Two nights ago I lost a total of seventy-eight nets, and last night I lost a further thirty odd. One cannot go on indefinitely with losses like that, Mr. Craig. My fishermen are getting very restive, and I have been forced to replace their nets free of charge. You can imagine what the expense has been."

Mr. Craig shook his head and clucked sympathetically. He murmured something about dogfish.

"No," she said. "It's not dogfish, and you know that as well as I do, Mr. Craig. It's that Dutch buss. It's been systematically and deliberately running down my fishermen's nets."

"Good gracious!" said Mr. Craig, with every appearance of surprise and concern. "But this is a matter for the law, madam. I would advise you to report it immediately."

"I have reported it," she said dryly. "And I have been informed that steps are being taken to investigate my charges, but as far as I can make out nothing at all is being done, and meantime I am losing nets faster than I can buy them. What am I to do about it, Mr. Craig?"

"I can't imagine," Mr. Craig said, startled at this direct appeal. He looked away uneasily, and stared, blinking, into the fire, searching it for inspiration. "I don't know what to suggest, ma'am, and that's a fact. It's plainly a matter for the authorities."

"The authorities in this town take their orders from Mr. Carmichael," she said. "Let us be frank with one another, Mr. Craig. Your firm is doing all it can to drive me out of business, even to the extent of hiring this Dutch ship to run down my nets. No, please don't deny it. We both know it's true. What I want to know is, why are you so anxious to get rid of me, Mr. Craig? There's plenty of room for us both in Kaysie, and a small old-fashioned business like Skene's can never really compete—I mean, we can never be a dangerous rival to a huge influential concern like the Moray Frith.

I just can't understand why you people should go to such a lot of expense and trouble to ruin me. Why is it, Mr. Craig? What is it you have against me?"

"Madam, I assure you . . ."

"Please don't lie to me, Mr. Craig. I am being completely honest with you. For instance, I've told no one else at all, but I don't mind telling you in strict confidence that I've just lost a most valuable cargo. You know I shipped a big cargo of earlies to Hamburg last week? In the *Cherokee Girl*."

Mr. Craig nodded, his face sharp with interest.

"Well, it's at the bottom of the sea. I heard yesterday that the *Cherokee Girl* foundered off St. Andrews."

"It was a great mistake," Mr. Craig said. "A great mistake. I could have warned you. A very old ship. And he has a bad reputation. McIntosh, isn't it? You were insured though, I suppose?"

She had expected that. "Yes," she lied. "But even so, the loss is considerable. I'm in desperate straits, Mr. Craig. I suppose it's very indiscreet of me to be as frank as this, but I flatter myself that I am a good judge of character and I feel sure that I can trust you. . . ."

"You can, madam, you can."

"And that you yourself cannot have had anything to do with the wicked schemes that certain of the Moray Frith directors have been employing against me. I feel sure that had you known you would not have permitted . . ."

"Indeed, I would not, madam. I am not concerned with the making of the firm's policy. I merely receive my orders and do what I can to carry them out."

She took out a filmy handkerchief, and under pretence of blowing her nose dabbed her eyes just noticeably enough for Mr. Craig to notice. "You see," she said, very naïvely and making a play with the handkerchief, "it has always seemed to me that there's not only room for both our firms in Kaysie, but room for us both to expand. I have such plans—such wonderful plans—practical plans too—if only I had somebody to help me carry them out. I mean—well, I've thought of a partnership, for instance, if only I could find the right man. It would have to be a man who knows the business, of course, and who knows the district also, but alas, such men aren't easy to find. . . ."

"Nevertheless, there *are* such men," Mr. Craig said, adroitly taking his cue and leaning so far forward in his chair that he all but lost contact with it. "I assure you there are such men, Mistress Skene, and if your business was in a healthy condition I don't think they would hesitate. . . ."

"Ay," she said. "But there's the rub. How can I possibly have a healthy business, how can I build it up, preserve it even, when you are doing all you can to destroy me—undercutting my prices, bribing and intimidating my fishermen, interfering with my foreign contacts—yes, even sinking my ships? I had hoped that some day with the right kind of partner by my side I could build up—I mean, we could build up a business quite as big and powerful as the Moray Frith is now. And it could be done. I know it could, if only I had the right kind of man to advise and protect me. Skene's reputation is second to none both here and on the Continent, and our continental agents are among the most respected in the trade. There's any amount of goodwill for Skene's. All I need is breathing space—a little time just now to make good my losses, to consolidate the business—and then, with an experienced manager to assist me and with a little capital tucked away against emergencies, I should —we should be able to face the future with complete confidence, no matter what tricks any of our rivals chose to play on us. This is not just a dream, Mr. Craig, it's a practical proposition. . . ."

"Indeed it is; I can see it is," Mr. Craig said, nodding emphatically. "And, dear lady, if I may say so, a most interesting and—er —yes, attractive proposition, one which makes an instant appeal. And particularly as the partnership of which you speak might in due course perhaps even be cemented, might it not, into a partnership of a more durable and—er—intimate nature?"

She had no need to ask what he meant. He had swallowed the bait hook, line, and sinker with a voracity which even she, who had dangled it, thought unseemly. She lowered her eyes demurely out of sight. "I had not dared to think so far ahead."

"I can understand. In your present circumstances—your recent bereavement. . . ."

"Precisely," she said, and she made her voice soft and shy. "Nevertheless, the possibility of which you have spoken is, of course, by no means out of the question—in the future."

"Perhaps, after a reasonable period—say a couple of years?"

He was more of an opportunist than she had imagined.

"Two years hence would seem to be quite a reasonable time," she said, "to consider the matter further."

Mr. Craig was so carried away that he blew his long nose like a trumpet and spoke with his handkerchief still at his face. "Would you have any objection," he demanded, "to adding another name to the firm?"

She felt herself stiffen with resentment. "None," she said meekly.

"Craig & Skene," Mr. Craig whispered to himself, looking right through her into the future. "Craig & Skene." And he savoured the name with an audible smack of his lips.

She felt a stab of anger at his impertinence, but she was able to remind herself that this was all make-believe, and that she herself had done all she could to encourage his presumption. Yet, even in make-believe there were liberties which she could not permit. "The name would of course be Skene &—whatever other name was added," she said mildly. And then, still concealing her face, she gave a nervous little laugh. "But what are we talking of, Mr. Craig? In two years' time there may be no such thing as Skene's business. There certainly won't be unless I can weather this spell of bad luck; and, candidly, I don't see how I can weather it, Mr. Craig, unless—somehow—somebody—stops this Dutch buss from running down my nets."

She looked Mr. Craig straight in the eyes then for the first time in several minutes, and was gratified to observe that she was now regarding an ally.

"You understand?" she said pointedly. "The position is desperate."

Mr. Craig nodded. "I understand," he said, "perfectly."

A few minutes later, when Mr. Craig took his leave, he shook her hand with something more than cordiality. "I can't promise anything," he said. "But I'll do whatever I can, Mistress Skene."

She was well satisfied. She did not over-estimate Mr. Craig's place in the Moray Frith scheme of things, and she did not expect miracles from him. Nevertheless, he was nicely placed to throw grit into the machine, and she settled down hopefully to wait for results.

CHAPTER IV

(1)

THIRZA WAITED FOR THREE WEEKS. During that time the fishing was heavy, and it was heart-breaking for her, watching from her window each morning, to see the Moray Frith boats creep in loaded to their gunnels with herrings, while Skene's boats, riding high in the water, scudded in with only a litter of lacerated nets to show for the night's work. Sometimes the inactivity of merely watching was too much to be borne, and then she would drive down to the harbour to question the stiff-backed, sullen fishermen, and to console them with a show of optimism which she was far from feeling.

She alone knew the desperate state of her finances. Each day brought its new losses, its increased tension, and soon her last hope —that Mr. Craig might do something to help—vanished with all the others into the limbo. She continued to send the boats to sea simply because she could not think of an alternative.

Her fishermen were all for action. They wanted to fight. They were frustrated and angry, and there was now no question of their loyalty. Given the chance, they would have torn the Dutchman limb from limb, and Thirza would gladly have helped them to do so. With Mr. Donald she explored the possibilities of arming them for battle with the buss, but, alas, it was a high-decked vessel big as a galliot, with a gun fore and aft, and a crew of at least forty men. It would have been suicide to attack it.

By day the Dutchman lay off the coast, ostensibly curing his catch of herrings. Sometimes he disappeared altogether, and hopes would run high that he had left the Frith, but the following morning his hull would bulk as menacingly as ever at the end of Thirza's telescope, and the light Skene boats, scudding homewards, told the same old tale.

Although Skene's fishermen could not come to grips with the Dutchman, they could at least vent their feelings on the rival fisher-

men of the Moray Frith, and there were some ugly scenes at the quayside when frustrated men, goaded by a chance remark or by the sight of their neighbours' prosperity, attacked unloading crews, and fought with the ferocity of maddened animals until the Moray Frith fishermen, uniting in self-defence and with the advantage of superior numbers, swept them from the quay.

Thirza was at her wits' end. And then one day, some three weeks after her talk with Mr. Craig, the rumour reached her that the *Foolish Virgin* had been seen passing up the Bay and had put in at the little town of Cullen, ten miles up the coast.

This was what she had been waiting for.

She did not hesitate. She would have preferred to seek help elsewhere, but she was in no position to pick and choose.

She sent for the Dominie.

The Dominie had now been living in the White House for almost two years, and, as a result of Manson's daily strictures, was a very much better man than he had ever been before.

It had seemed to Thirza that it would be very convenient to have the Dominie at her beck and call in the White House: she had hoped to make lessons a part of her daily routine. But, alas, since William's death she simply had not had the time to spare for study, and she was hard put to find jobs for the Dominie to keep him out of mischief. She had soon found that he could not be employed without disaster in the most menial tasks about the house or garden. But, given paper-work of any kind, he was perfectly happy and harmless. Accordingly, she had him write papers on all kinds of subjects connected with the curing industry—the Problems of Marketing, the Dutch Method of Curing, the Chronological History of the Herring Fishery. The Case For and Against the Trawl, and so on.

The only other use to which the Dominie could be put was running errands. He was not always a satisfactory messenger, but of late he had shown himself remarkably responsible. He had bought what he had been sent to buy, and had told the right persons exactly what he had been sent to tell. Thirza decided therefore to entrust him now with her message to Captain Stullen.

She would have preferred to send Mr. Donald, but Mr. Donald had shown clearly that he did not approve of Captain Stullen. He

had been very upset the last time he had acted as messenger between Stullen and herself. She knew what Mr. Donald's trouble was.

Mr. Donald, quite simply, was jealous.

And so, in this case, she though it politic to by-pass Mr. Donald altogether and to take the risk of sending the Dominie instead.

She wrote a letter to Stullen, handed it to the Dominie, and gave him express and simple instructions. He was merely to give the letter to Captain Stullen and to bring back the reply. If Captain Stullen questioned him about the Dutchman, he was to tell all he knew. He could be perfectly frank with Captain Stullen, but on no account was he to breathe a word of this to a single other soul. Not even to Alicky Mac, who would drive him. No one must know. It must be a secret between the three of them.

She said, "You know how important the business is to me? Well, the business, this house, my life—all our lives depend upon it. You've got to take this message to Captain Stullen as quickly as you can, Dominie. Get Alicky Mac to stop at the outskirts of Cullen, don't tell him where you're going or what you are going to do, go straight down to the harbour and deliver the letter in private to Captain Stullen personally." She put a hand on his sleeve. "And remember, Dominie, I'm depending on you."

"You can trust me, Thirza," the Dominie said. It was the simplest sentence she ever remembered hearing him speak. He stowed the letter carefully in the inside pocket of his coat and they went out together to the coach.

Alicky Mac had already been told that he was to take the Dominie to Cullen and he was waiting at the door. He was in a bad temper at the prospect of such a long journey, and when Alicky Mac was in a bad temper everyone knew it. He was talking audibly to himself as they came out, informing himself that he was a coachman, not a carrier, and that in the good old days he had been expected to drive only ladies and gentlemen in his coach. Nowadays—phew!—any ragtag and bobtail, any eddicated tink, any gawkit slype could be foisted on to him. Nae conseederation for an aul' man. Nae thocht o' the sheltie. Nae pride in the bonny viackle. . . .

"Cullen!" Thirza said, shouting. "And don't waste any time on the road."

He cupped his hand to his ear. "Fit's 'at, missus?"
"I said, drive fast."
"Ye canna drive fast a' the way t' Cullen."
"Well, as fast as you can," she said.
Still grumbling, Alicky Mac climbed up on the driving seat. The Dominie, with his hand on the letter in his inside pocket, an elongated Napoleon, hoisted himself awkwardly into the interior.
"Good luck," Thirza said. She closed the door. The Dominie, seated on the sacking which Alicky Mac had maliciously spread on the seat, nodded graciously. Alicky Mac picked up the reins, talking louder than ever to himself, and they were off.
That was at ten in the morning.
It was after midnight when the coach returned.
Thirza had been waiting for it since early afternoon, and when she heard the wheels on the drive she snatched up a lantern and ran outside.
"Whoa!" Alicky Mac said. He halted the mare and sat like a ramrod, not even glancing down when Thirza pulled open the coach door.
There was no Dominie inside. The coach was empty.
She said, "Where is he?"
"Dinna ken."
She was aghast. "But you took him to Cullen, didn't you?"
"Fit's 'at, missus?"
"You took him to Cullen?"
"Ay."
That, at least, was something. "Go on," she commanded.
"And then he telt me t' wait."
"And you waited?"
"Ay."
"And he didn't come back?"
"That he didna."
"Well," she said, exasperated. "Well? What did you do?"
"I lookit f'r him."
"Where?"
"A' w'y."
"The inns?"
"I tried them a'. He wisna naeroad."

There was nothing more to be got from Alicky Mac. He knew little and cared less. One could infer from him only that he had known all along that this would happen, that this was precisely the sort of thing you had to expect if you were fool enough to transport an ill-bred and ill-kempt creature like the Dominie in a coach.

Thirza went uneasily to bed.

It had all seemed so simple. Before she had sent the Dominie she had not been able to see how he could fail to carry out her instructions; and later, when she had begun to worry about his prolonged absence, she had consoled herself with the reflection that the errand was so easy that it was impossible for even the Dominie to botch it. Now, she was riddled with doubts. She not only did not know whether Stullen would help her or not, she did not know even whether her letter had been delivered. Moreover, she would not know until in his own good time the Dominie chose to return.

She lay awake for hours, considering every possible aspect of the Dominie's disappearance, reflecting bitterly on her own stupidity.

As a result she overslept next morning, and awoke to the galling news that during the night Skene's had lost a further fifty-eight nets.

For the whole of the next day she hovered around the back windows, watching the Drive for the Dominie's return. Manson was just as anxious. She was at pains to point out that she personally regarded the loss of the Dominie as a good riddance, but her behaviour belied her words. She was edgy and bad-tempered all day, and twice, although she hated exercise, put on her outdoors coat and shoes and walked the quarter-mile down to the gate to look suspiciously along the coast road and cluck her tongue in irritation.

They spent a thoroughly uncomfortable evening seated opposite each other at the parlour fire, each pretending to be engrossed in her task, and each painfully conscious of the other's pretence. At every sound their heads came up and they exchanged questioning, and then irritated, glances. As they were lighting their candles for bed Manson made a direct reference to the subject in both their minds.

"I suppose I'd better leave the door open for him," she said.

"I wouldn't," Thirza said coldly.

But later, when Manson was in bed, she crept downstairs to make

sure that the door was open. And it was, of course. She returned upstairs on tiptoe, but a creaking stair betrayed her. The door of Manson's room was thrust open, and the housekeeper's face, obscured by a large, dangling bed-cap, peered over the banister rail.

"Oh, it's you," she said. "I thocht mebbe it was him."

And the ladies, somewhat curtly, bid each other good night for the second time and retired to their beds.

(2)

It seemed to Thirza that she was no sooner asleep than Manson's voice was in her ears again.

"Wake up! Wake up, Thirzy!" it seemed to be saying.

She sat bolt upright in bed and thrust aside the curtains. It was no dream. Manson stood by the side of the bed, holding a candelabrum high in the air, a coat fastened over her nightdress. "The Dominie's hame," she said. "He's been at the bottle again. But that disna matter noo. D'ye hear the noise in the Bay, Thirza? There's a terrible battle goin' on oot there. The guns woke me, an' I catched the Dominie creepin' up the stairs. Ye should see the flashes! It's like a fireworks display. Listen, d'ye hear the guns?"

"No," Thirza said. Wide-awake now, she swung her legs out of the bed, fumbled her way into a pair of slippers, and thrust her arms into a dressing-gown.

"I think mebbe it's the Dutchman," Manson said. "I feel it in ma bones."

Thirza smiled. The rumble of guns, borne on a north-westerly breeze, sounded close at hand, and the window rattled ominously. Thirza sprang up, grabbed her bedside candelabrum, lit it from Manson's, and gave the housekeeper a delighted hug. "It's the Dutchman all right," she said, pleased as Punch, and laughing aloud with relief and excitement. "I knew the Dominie wouldn't fail us, and this is the proof of it, bless him, bottle and all! Let's go down to the study and see what's happening."

For an hour they watched the battle from the windows of Thirza's study. It was a clear, starry night, and with the aid of the telescope Thirza could make out the lights of the fishing-boats, and, in the repeated gun flashes, the illumined shapes of two larger vessels. She could not identify those larger ships, although she was

sure that the Dutch buss was one and the *Foolish Virgin* the other. She had the clear impression that the inshore ship was firing oftener than the ship which stood farther out to sea, but beyond that she could not follow the action, it was all far too confusing; and when, after a great flare of light, the gun flashes ceased altogether, she was unable to answer Manson's impatient questions.

They waited expectantly for a further hour, and then, when there was no more excitement of any kind, retired once again to bed.

Thirza was at the telescope again whenever the first streaks of light appeared in the sky, but it was not until half an hour later that she was able to make out the two ships. The Dutch buss and Captain Stullen's clipper were alongside one another, moored together, and apparently riding on one anchor. One ship, presumably, was the captive of the other, but there was no way of knowing which.

Breakfast that morning was the travesty of a meal. Even Manson, who disliked going out of a morning, was anxious to get down to the harbour. Alicky Mac was rooted, grumbling, from his bed, and by half-past six Skene's coach was drawn up on the foreshore, and the two ladies had joined the crowd of inquisitive and anxious fisherfolk already congregated on the quay. They waited with growing impatience for the boats to come in with the news.

The fishing had been heavy. The boats came in sluggishly, and for once Thirza would have been glad to see at least one of her boats come in empty and fast.

But the whole fleet had struck the herring shoals, and it was not until almost two hours later that the first boat—a Moray Frither—was near enough to be hailed for information by the folks at the end of the pier. He knew no more than they did. He had seen the fight from a distance off, and he had thought that the *Virgin* had had the better of it. He had just been starting to put his gear over when the fight began—ay, he could tell them that at least. "It wis Stullen as begun it"—and he had immediately hauled in and put another mile between himself and the battle before dropping his nets.

This boat was followed in by two or three others whose crews knew no more than the first. They began to come in in batches then. Thirza spoke to several of her own skippers. They had little

to tell her, and it was left to Geordie Mair, one of the last to enter the harbour, to give her the information which temporarily set her mind at rest.

"Ay, Stullen's in command," Geordie said. "I cam' roun' his stern a couple o' hours syne, sa' some o' his crew and gie'd 'em a holler. Wullie here shouted, 'Fit've ye de'en wi' the Dutchman?' an' that big nigger—ye winna ken him, Thirza—he up wi' his hand tae his neck and shouts, 'Cut off thems bloddy throats.'"

Thirza joined in the laughter. This was the best news she had had in years, and it was with a light heart and smiles for all and sundry that she picked her way back along the pier to join Manson in the carriage.

She found Manson in conversation with John MacPherson.

John had arrived only a few minutes before, but had already picked up all the available information. He immediately accepted Thirza's offer to drive him back to Kaysie. "There'll be nothing more happening now," he said, settling down beside Thirza, "until evening or perhaps to-morrow morning, when they bring Stullen in. That'll cause a real stir."

"Bring Stullen in!" Thirza repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Mr. MacPherson's been telling me about it," Manson said. "They've sent for the Coastguard."

She looked from one face to the other.

"Yes," John MacPherson said. "The Provost rode over to Carmichael House at the crack of dawn this morning, and Mr. Carmichael has sent his groom to Aberdeen for the Coastguard. This is just what they've been waiting for. Stullen has overstepped himself at last."

Thirza's happiness drained away and was promptly replaced by dismay. "You mean, they'll arrest him?"

"They certainly will," John assured her. "The town won't be troubled by that band of cut-throats any longer. Stullen's put himself outside the law with a vengeance. Piracy on the high seas, and the whole town witness to it. Murder, too, no doubt. But even without murder the piracy's quite enough."

"They'll send him to prison?" Thirza enquired.

"They'll hang him."

"You really think so?"

"I'm certain of it." John was in good spirits. He was one of those who had been most outspoken against Stullen from the start, and in leaders in the *Kaysie Advertiser* he had openly criticised the Council for not taking steps to rid the town of the crew of the *Foolish Virgin*. "As murderous-looking a gang of scoundrels as has ever, in all its long history, descended on this old town," he had written. "It is preposterous that our honest inhabitants, going about their lawful occasions in their own native town, should be subjected daily to the fear of murder and rapine; and it is worse than preposterous, it is intolerable that our womenfolk, in these days of civilisation and order, should be unable to venture unescorted into the streets. . . ."

It was natural for John to presume that Thirza, like himself, like all other law-abiding citizens, would welcome Stullen's arrest, and he spoke with satisfaction on the point for several minutes. Manson, remembering her own experience on the *Foolish Virgin,* was enthusiastically in agreement, but Thirza was strangely unresponsive. John, watching her as he spoke, decided that he knew what was troubling her.

"I know you've been very bitter about the Dutchman," he said. "And Stullen's attack has probably pleased you. But, don't you see, it's not a question of taking sides. When two mad dogs fight, it's natural enough to hope that the one which has bitten you will come off worst. But remember, neither you nor anybody else is safe until the other is destroyed as well."

Thirza gave him her brightest smile. She wished he would stop talking and let her think. She had never felt so little sympathy with him, and it was with heartfelt relief that she dropped him at the *Kaysie Advertiser* office.

"Home, ma'am?" Alicky Mac enquired.

She nodded.

"I sa' Mistress Simpson," Manson said, "doon by at the harbour there. I nivver sa' sic a sight. She'd on ene o' they floory weskit gee-gaws—at her age ye'd think she'd ken better, an' her the Meenister's wife an' a'—and sure as fate . . ."

"Hold your tongue," Thirza said.

Manson gave her a sharp look, and flung herself, bridling, back in her corner. "Some folks," she said, but Thirza was in a world

of her own. She sat leaning forward, staring fixedly at Alicky Mac's stiff back, her eyes narrow and thoughtful. Every now and again she would shake her head slowly and run her middle finger along the line of her tightly pursed lips. She was very perturbed.

If Captain Stullen were taken and stood his trial, would he not be asked why he had attacked the Dutchman? And would he not reveal her letter? That would be intolerable. To have her name publicly linked with his! . . . She blew out a horrified breath. And what if he was sentenced to death? It was a fearful thought that he might be hanged for simply having helped her; that she would be responsible for his death. . . .

She slewed round in her seat and cast a glance in the direction of the sea, temporarily concealed from sight by the buildings in the High Street. She was grateful to Stullen, oh, immensely grateful, but why—why hadn't he the sense to escape now while he still had the chance? Why hadn't he got away under cover of dark when there might still have been some doubt of his identity? She cupped her hand on her temples and slapped imperiously.

There was only one thing for it. She must send a message out to him immediately.

She must warn him that the Coastguard cutter was on its way, and direct him to beat up northwards in order to give the cutter the slip. She must send a messenger the moment she reached the house. . . .

Satisfied, now that she had come to a decision, she sat back and crossed her legs. She became aware of Manson then, and she put a hand on the housekeeper's plump, resistant knee, and patted it affectionately. "I'm sorry, Manson."

"I should hope so."

"It was because I was so worried."

"Jist the same, ye shouldna talk to me like that."

"I know, Manson. I'm truly sorry." She went on patting and stroking the housekeeper's knee, gazing into the big stubborn face with engaging anxiety and then artfully releasing a smile. "There now," she said. "I promise it. I won't ever be rude to you again."

(3)

Tarry Bowie, bearing Thirza's message, rowed out to the *Foolish*

Virgin before noon and did not return till nearly four in the afternoon.

Thirza, watching his small boat bobbing in the sea at the Dutch buss's stern, could imagine no reason for the delay, and as the hours ticked away, she stalked her room in a frenzy of impatience. Every few minutes she went to the telescope to scan the Frith to the eastward for sign of the Coastguard cutter, and then to swivel the telescope back to the two ships with the little boat moored astern.

When at last Tarry Bowie reported back at the White House, she knew at once that he had been drinking. He came in with excessive dignity, looking more than ever like a patriarch of old Israel. He stalked up to her desk, placing his feet with great deliberation, and bowed gravely, his spade-like beard digging into his guernsey.

"Well?" she demanded.

Tarry Bowie sat down and stroked his beard back into shape. He crossed one sturdy leg over the other and fixed her with a look of great intensity.

"Well?" she demanded again, wriggling with impatience. "What happened?"

"Captain Stullen," Tarry declared, "is a vairry ceevil man. A man o' great ceevility."

"You gave him the message?"

"Ay."

"You told him about the Coastguard?"

"Ay."

"And what did he say?"

"He thanked me. Ye micht expect him to be a reuch an' ready kin' o' chiel. But nae him. He's a man o' great ceevility, Thirza."

"Yes, yes," she said. "But what is he going to do about it? Why hasn't he sailed? What's the matter with him? Is the ship damaged?"

"I dinna ken."

"But surely he told you?"

"Na, na," Tarry said. "We hid a clake aboot the fishin'. Captain Stullen informed me that in the Gulf o' Bothnia he's seen them fishin' in ice. They mak' a puckle holes an' cairry ropes frae ene hole t' th' ither by means o' boat-books or spars, if ye follow me, an' then when they've got a circle wi' the net in the watter under

the ice, they drag it oot at a muckle big hole at the side. Would ye credit that noo? In my opeenion that's a vairry enterprisin' way o' fishin'. Captain Stullen was also for tellin' me aboot the seinnin' in Norway. Noo this is an interaistin' thing. . . ."

"Tarry," Thirza said, "did you—are you sure you explained to Captain Stullen how urgent it is that he should leave at once, before the Coastguard gets here?"

"Oh ay, I telt him."

"What did you say?"

"I telt him they'd hang him."

"And what did he say to that?"

"He jist laughed. I maun state that I found him a vairry ceevil man, although, mind you, Thirza, I'm nae sayin' that I *approve* o' him. Ye'll understand I had to be ceevil wi' the man. I couldna say nay. But I did say, 'Weel, jist a wee drappie,' and then he got on aboot this seine-net fishin' I was tellin' ye aboot, an' I maun say again that he's a man o' great ceevility and experience. Did ye ken, for instance, that in Scandinavia the herrings are selled by number? And anither thing—far wis't noo, in Prussia or wis't in the Behring Straits? Na, 'twas up a river, the River Kovina, he said—farever that micht be—they fish by branches. Ay. Wait till I tell ye. Fishin' for herrin'. They pit these branches across the river. . . ."

"Tarry," Thirza said, getting up in exasperation. "You're drunk."

"Na, na, I may have hid a drappie, but nae enough to impair ma judgment. And I tell you, Thirza"—and he raised a massive forefinger and peered round it—"Captain Stullen . . . is a man . . . of . . . uncommon ceevility."

There was no more information to be got from Tarry. She counselled him to be as discreet as he knew how, and sent him home with Mr. Donald as escort. Then she returned to her telescope.

The *Foolish Virgin* still lay at anchor, and there was no sign of activity on her deck.

Just before dusk the Coastguard cutter, running free with every stitch of canvas set, rounded Dinnair Head and slipped into the Bay. Shortly afterwards it nosed up alongside the Dutch buss and the American clipper ship, and Thirza, watching tensely, fancied she could see the figures of the Coastguards as they climbed aboard.

Sick at heart, she continued to watch, and, even after darkness fell, sat staring out at the anchor lights. She must have dozed off, sitting there at the window in the dark, for she suddenly became aware that something was happening. There were now many lights showing on the Fishertown side of the Bay, and, just off the harbour mouth, she could see the lanterns of a ship under way.

She studied it carefully through the glass. It was the Coastguard cutter, and she guessed that it was bringing Captain Stullen ashore. She could have wept with frustration.

Down in the Fishertown there would be tremendous excitement. Already she could see myriads of winking lights, and she knew that the people would be out in force, everyone with his torch or his lantern, jostling each other for good positions, pressing dangerously near the edge of the quay as the cutter came alongside, fathers holding their children up to see something the like of which had never been seen in Kaysie before. She closed her eyes, and shuddered. She saw Stullen, manacled, surrounded by an escort of coastguards, and she heard the word, "Judas! Judas!" from a long way off.

"I wasn't to blame," she said aloud. "I wasn't!" And she was able to explain to her own complete satisfaction that the only person at fault was Captain Stullen himself. And Carmichael, of course. Carmichael, who had engineered it all. Who had brought the Dutch buss to Kaysie to ruin her. Who had sent for the Coastguard. Who was instrumental in the arrest, and who would see to it that the law—his law—was carried out to the bitter end. Carmichael, who stood for everything that she most hated and who hated her so bitterly. Carmichael. The eternal enemy.

She retired to bed early. She was worn out with the happenings of the past two days, yet could not sleep. She had only to close her eyes to see a fearful panorama of events culminating in the execution of Captain Stullen, and it was no consolation to remind herself that it was entirely his own blame. After a little she got up, lit her candles, and slipped on a robe.

She paced the bedroom floor.

She tried to be very rational. Stullen had been arrested. Stullen would be tried and hanged. So far so bad. Now take the personal aspect. What responsibility had she? Was it her duty to make it

public that she had asked Stullen for help? Would it weaken the case against him? Would it mitigate his sentence? Would it do him one small particle of good? The answer was no. No, no, no. No to everything. And yet—surely the only justification—the only possible defence that Stullen could put forward was that the Dutchman had been committing a crime in running down the nets and that he, Stullen, had taken the only means of stopping it? And surely it was her duty to give evidence in his defence—to accuse the Dutchman—to confess that she had asked for Stullen's help?

Stripped of its non-essentials, the problem simply was: was she to do everything in her power to assist Captain Stullen, or was she not? Was she prepared to sacrifice her reputation, her friends—and by this she meant John MacPherson—and perhaps even her business in order to put forward a defence for Captain Stullen which at the best would not set him free and which at the worst might do him no service at all? Logically, there could be only one answer. But was this a matter for logic? What would William have advised? Oh no, not that. She checked that line of thought. She knew only too well what William's advice would be, and she didn't want it. . . .

She was aware of the scratching noise for some minutes before she located it at the window. Ivy, she thought. Ivy blowing in the wind. And after a second she resumed her pacing. But the sound increased, and now it was the sound of knocking. Odd. She stood stock-still. Perhaps a bird or a bat attracted by a chink of light. Automatically she tightened the sash of her satin robe and stepped towards the window, and as she did so the nearer shutter flew open and a man thrust his leg over the window-sill.

"All right, ma'am. Only me," he said.

It was Stullen.

She opened her mouth to scream, not so much in fear as in shock, but before her voice answered its summons he had clamped his big hand across the lower part of her face, and she was held as if in a vice.

"Take it easy," he said to her goggling eyes. "No sense in wakin' everybody."

She remembered him so well—every line of his hard arrogant face, the odd nasal intonation in his voice, the rich rope odour from

his clothes. A nausea overtook her, and he saw the panic in her eyes and held her tighter, his fingers pressing painfully into the flesh of her jaw.

"Now steady," he said. "Steady there, ma'am. When you're quiet I'll let you go. There's no call to be alarmed."

She closed her eyes, and he slipped his hand from her mouth to her shoulder. He held her firmly.

"All right?"

"Yes," she whispered. "But I think I'm going to faint."

"I wouldn't, ma'am," he said. "There are times when it pays a lady to faint, and there are times when it doesn't, and this is one of them, if you follow me."

She followed him perfectly. She opened her eyes and wriggled out of his grasp. "How did you get here?"

"I climbed."

"How did you know—this was my room?"

"I've made it my business to know."

She shuddered, gently massaging her cheeks, her eyes fixed on him. "But how did you get here? I thought you were in jail."

"I was, ma'am, for upwards of half an hour."

"And you escaped!" The haze of fear lifted. She was alert now, anxious for him. "You must go. Take my horse. Wait. Go out in the passage. There'll be nobody about. I'll dress and come down to the stable with you. I can say you stole it. The horse, I mean. And you'll want money. And food. Quick, out you go!"

"Nope!"

He was impossible. He was standing rooted, vast and immovable, a smile on his face, genuinely amused, as if there was no danger, and as if she was an oddity, some freak at a side-show. She flushed and drew her wrap tighter at the waist. "Captain Stullen!" she said sharply.

"Mistress Skene," he said, mocking her.

"You don't seem even now to realise . . ."

"No, ma'am, it's you who's failin' to realise. I'm mighty obliged to you, I'm sure, for your horse and your money and your food. I always reckoned you had a tender little heart, an' now I know it. Yes, I'm mighty obliged." He pulled a chair to him, turned it, and sat down, legs astraddle, his elbows on the chair-back. "But it jest

so happens that I don't want your horse, and I don't want your money, and I don't want your food."

She checked herself on the edge of the precipice of asking what he did want, but he saw both the question and the stop, and threw back his head and laughed in a way that she was quite sure no man had ever laughed in that bedroom before. She was furious. "Captain Stullen, I think you owe me an explanation."

"All right, ma'am. Jest give me a chance to speak. I haven't escaped from anywhere. I'm here, not as a fugitive from justice, but as a friend—well, maybe that's puttin' it too high—as a neighbour, let's say, a neighbour come visitin'. A social call."

She didn't understand.

"But didn't the Coastguard arrest you?"

"Not exactly, ma'am. I reckon mebbe they had that intention in the first place, but I was able to hand over your Dutchman to them, and they arrested him instead." He watched her, enjoying her bewilderment. "Van Leusen is his name. Leastways, that's what he calls himself. I've known him off an' on ten years or more. A bad character, ma'am. A wanted man. Right now there's three, four countries all agunnin' for Mr. Van Leusen for piracy and smugglin', an' half a dozen more offences agin maritime law, and it so happens Britain's one o' them. Your Coastguard turned out mighty grateful to me, ma'am, when I produced Van Leusen's own documents to prove who he was. He's a vain man. He even had a Wanted notice in his cabin, daguerreotype an' all."

She said, "And so they let you go?"

"They hadn't much choice, ma'am."

"And now?"

"Now I'm here to thank you."

"Why thank *me*?"

"Well, you see, it's like this. There's a bounty out for the capture o' this Mr. Van Leusen—a handsome sum—and, moreover, there's the cargo. He had a rich cargo battened down under these herring holds o' his, and it wasn't fish, ma'am. So you can see I got reason to be grateful."

It was hard to assimilate so much in so short a time. She said, "And I also am grateful to you, Captain Stullen. You've rid me of an enemy, and I'm obliged." She felt his eyes on her and remem-

bered to be afraid. She was very afraid. Her voice lifted anxiously. "And now, I think it is time you left."

"You always spoil things, ma'am," Stullen said, drawling. "You're always jest that little jump ahead o' yourself. Why can't you and I have a friendly li'l talk? Do you know, I haven't seen you since I did that job o' work for you with the herrings? I haven't even told you how much I appreciated your letter. You remember your letter, ma'am, thankin' me for my poor services? That was quite a letter. When you get a quill in your hand you certainly go to town. I reckon you put your whole heart into that letter—and preserved it in ice."

Thirza said, "I am not in the habit of entertaining gentlemen in my boudoir in the middle of the night. You might kindly go now, Captain Stullen."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not in the habit of visiting you in your—boudoir—in the middle of the night. This is an occasion, ma'am, and I think we should make the most of it."

"How dare you!"

"Spit away, ma'am. It sure becomes you. You're a real picture standin' there shiverin' in your kimono. Do you know that in Japan the girls wear these all day long? They go out in the streets in 'em, but they fasten 'em with a wider sash than yours, an' they fasten them better. They got to, because they don't wear a darn thing underneath. Now I remember once, in the Street of the Fans in Yokohama . . ."

"I am not interested in your recollections," she said hotly. "I insist that you leave my house at once."

"No, don't insist, ma'am. It's kind of unmannerly, and I don't like it."

"If you don't go at once," she said, "I shall ring and have you thrown out."

He laughed, shaking his head. "You sure are a character."

"Captain Stullen, this is your last chance. If you don't go immediately I shall ring this bell for my servants."

"Looks like you and I jest can't be friends, ma'am," he said. "But thank God we can still be lovers."

She made a dash for the bell, but without rising from his chair he leaned forward, quick as a ferret, and caught her skirts.

She strained away unavailingly.

"You go on pullin', ma'am, and I wouldn't be surprised you pulled all the clothes off'n you."

She sobbed with temper. How she hated him! How maddening to be so helpless! . . .

With a sudden jerk at her skirt he had her tumbling against him. And then, willy-nilly, she was lying on his knee, weeping and struggling, in a frenzy of resentment. Her feet lashed out at him. Deliberately, he closed his fist on the short hairs at the base of her neck and screwed his wrist over, jolting her head back so that she screamed at the pain of it. "You're a mettlesome little filly," he said mildly. "But you ought to know by now that it doesn't do you any good to kick." He flicked at her sash, and she lay still and humiliated, in an agony of expectancy. "There jest isn't a thing you can do about it," he said.

And she knew that he was right.

(4)

There was a sequel to Captain Stullen's visit.

The following evening, just after dark, a large seaman's chest, labelled "To Mistress Skene," was mysteriously delivered at the back door of the White House. It was very heavy. It took the combined efforts of Alicky Mac and the two maids to drag it into the hall.

Thirza, recognising the writing on the label, opened the chest with misgiving.

It contained silks and lace—bale upon bale of the finest quality silk in soft and subtle colours and Flemish and Italian hand-made lace of wondrous delicacy.

Thirza knelt, staring for several minutes; then, very red in the face, she sprang to her feet, instantly reminded of that other occasion, years ago, when she had been sent a gift of clothing and determined, this time, not even to touch or look.

Manson was on her knees, lifting out the bolts of material, exclaiming aloud, demanding her attention. "I nivver seen stuff like this," she said, grovelling in it. "Nae in a' ma born days. Why, nae even Mistress Carmichael has the like! Jist feel this, Thirza. Faur could it've come frae?"

"Smuggled," Thirza said shortly. "I shall not keep a single piece."

"And fa sent it?"

"I don't know."

Manson said, "Thirza, it must've been that Captain Stullen. It couldn've been onybody else. Fancy him sendin' ye a' this stuff! It maun be worth hunders—ay, hunders o' pounds sterling. Look at this collar. Jist tak' a gander, lassie."

Thirza looked. It was a white linen upturned collar of cut work and reticella needle-point lace. It was exquisite. She yielded reluctantly to Manson's entreaties, and slipped it round her neck.

"Oh, it's bonnie, Thirza. It's beautiful!"

Her reflection in the mirror startled her. She could honestly say that from the neck up she had never seen a finer lady. "It's—nice," she admitted. But after a moment she tossed it back into the chest. "I shall not accept any of these things," she said.

What did Captain Stullen think she was? Insufferable impertinence of the man! Did he think that she was another Deborah Carnie, to be used and paid for like a woman of the streets? Her blood boiled with indignation. She had never been so insulted. She was furiously angry in all but one small corner of her mind, and in that small corner she took careful inventory of each bolt and article as Manson removed it from the chest. It was interesting to assess the value that Captain Stullen put upon her services.

It was her original intention—her firm intention—to return the chest forthwith. Only one thing restrained her. It was such a big chest. So noticeable. How could she possibly send back so big and noticeable an article in secret? It was very vexing. She gave the problem much thought, and at last devised a compromise.

She decided to pay Captain Stullen for the goods. She decided to pay him, not what the goods were worth in Britain, but what they might perhaps have cost him abroad. A reasonable sum. She toyed with the idea of sending ten sovereigns, but eventually sent twenty. She also wrote Captain Stullen informing him curtly that she would not accept gifts of any kind from him, but that if he was prepared to supply her, as a business proposition, with certain goods in short supply in Scotland, she might be able to find a market for them.

It was in this way, and almost innocently, that she started on a life of crime.

CHAPTER V

(1)

STULLEN'S CAPTURE OF THE DUTCH buss was the turning-point in Thirza's career. Prior to this she had survived precariously. Constantly menaced by the machinations of the Moray Frith Curing Company, she had been for ever on the edge of disaster. She had weathered the storm, not so much by good management, as by sheer good fortune. From now on, however, her star was in the ascendant. Her fishing was consistently good and her gambles successful. She expanded Skene's business in many directions, and all her new ventures were crowned with gold. For the time being, she had the touch. As a business woman she could do no wrong.

Take the Australian venture as an instance.

On a falling European market she sent a large consignment of cured herrings to Australia. She sent these herrings against advice and entirely on speculation. As Fate would have it, the ship's arrival in Brisbane coincided with the Queensland gold rush. Food of every kind was at a premium, and, as a result, the transaction showed a handsome profit. Subsequent despatches informed her that the herrings had not been a success, having deteriorated considerably on passage, and that the retailers had been able to sell only a small proportion of their stock. She was sorry to hear this, but not sorry enough to return any part of the excellent price she had received. Seeing that there was no future market for herrings in Australia, she allowed news of her fantastic profits to leak to the Moray Frith, who, not to be outdone, despatched a big cargo to Australia and lost a pretty packet on the deal.

Safe from immediate money worries, Thirza began to put her plans for expansion into action. She was always ready to help a deserving fisherman to buy a boat, and the number of boats in which she had shares increased monthly. She bought an interest, on Mr. Donald's recommendation, in a small and hitherto unsuc-

cessful boat-building yard, and she worked late over the blue-prints of a new ropery, to undercut the Moray Frith's.

Her first major triumph over Richard Carmichael was the opening of a railway between Kaysie and Aberdeen. This was a project which had been mooted in the town for years, but which had been frustrated time and again by Carmichael's uncompromising opposition. His dislike for the railway arose, very reasonably, from the fact that he owned the controlling interest in all the public vehicles which served the district, and for years he had successfully exerted his influence to persuade the Town Council that the railway was a diabolical Liberal invention designed, with a total disregard of human life, to put fat profits into the pockets of its Quaker directors.

In the Town Council elections of 1865 Thirza devised the idea of putting forward a block of candidates under the slogan, *The Railway for Kaysie*. She launched the project at a series of dinner-parties, given to just the right people. She did not think it wise to allow it to be known that the original idea was hers, and she took pains to pin it on others who were only too pleased to take the credit. She canvassed judiciously, visiting the tradesmen who would profit most from the advent of the railway and pointing out, with careful absence of condescension, just where their interest lay. And finally, with the Dominie's assistance, she wrote a series of letters, signed *Sagittarius*, to the *Kaysie Advertiser*, explaining the advantages the railway would bring to the community and exposing the self-interest of those who opposed it.

John MacPherson took up the campaign with crusading fervour, and for two or three weeks before the election the *Kaysie Advertiser* resembled the *Iron Times*. Authoritative articles on the railway were contributed by railway officials. An economist produced a comparative analysis of the trade figures of Kaysie and of corresponding burghs which already had the railway. And several enterprising townsfolk wrote enthusiastic accounts of their journeys by rail. In the leaders there was persistent exhortation to Vote for Progress, and it was no surprise to find, when the votes were counted, that the Progressives—the Railwaymen—had been returned with a working majority to the Council.

The railway opened up possibilities which Thirza was quick to

exploit. Herrings could now be delivered fresh to the inland markets, and she lost no time in making contracts with fish wholesalers in all parts of the country.

She herself delighted in the adventure of railway travel and, with a stiffly terrified Manson as chaperon, journeyed as far afield as Edinburgh and Glasgow to meet wholesalers and to investigate their problems. On these trips she made certain clandestine visits, leaving Manson at their hotel while she ventured by hansom into the night to meet business associates in furtive conclave in the dimly-lit offices of millinery shops and even, on occasion, in the private rooms of public-houses.

She was well content with the results of those meetings. Thanks to Captain Stullen, she had found a very profitable side-line, and she used the money she obtained from the sale of Stullen's duty-free goods to bolster up her curing business and, wherever possible, to strike at the Moray Frith.

Even now, secure and prosperous as she was, she still feared the Moray Frith as much as ever. Richard Carmichael was still the bogy-man of her dreams. The more she injured him the more she feared and hated him. She was always on guard, and she never ceased, even though it might be to Skene's immediate disadvantage, to oppose the Moray Frith at every opportunity. Her fear had become an obsession with her, and many of her new business activities were designed, not so much to benefit Skene's, as to injure the Moray Frith. She was not satisfied now to hold her own. It was her ambition to put the Moray Frith out of business and to ruin Richard Carmichael, and until she had achieved this she felt she would know no real peace of mind.

Richard Carmichael played into her hands. He was an unyieldingly conservative man, and in this age of transition—an age of experiment and reform, of growth and boom, of the locomotive and the steamship and the submarine cable—he stood firmly entrenched in the creed of his fathers. He believed, he declared, in the *status quo,* and this meant that all his ideas were at least twenty years behind the times. He stubbornly opposed every new trend, resisted every inevitable advance. He was against industrialisation, against the spread of education and the extension of the franchise, against the improvement of working conditions and the abolition

of child labour. He was against the clock, and even without Thirza's energetic assistance, he would, in due course, have been swept into the limbo. Thirza merely hastened the process.

By opposing Carmichael Thirza came to identify herself with all the liberal and enlightened reforms in the district. She became a social reformer. She had a natural sympathy for the underdog, but she also had an instinct for minding her own business, and if she had not made it her business to oppose Carmichael, it is unlikely that she would have put herself to much trouble to do anything for anybody. It did not occur to her that she was motivated either by malice or self-interest. She truly thought that in struggling for the railroad, for a new and enlarged harbour, for the extension of town council representation to the Fishertown, she was influenced only by the thought of what was best for the people of Kaysie. She never troubled to search her conscience. She took it for granted that she was a good and moral woman, and on the few occasions when she had doubts of her own motives, as at the time of Janet Carmichael's death, John MacPherson was always at hand to reassure her.

Janet Carmichael's death came as a shock to the whole community.

It had been known for some time that she was ill, but she had made a fetish of her illnesses, and no one took them seriously, least of all those who knew her best.

The news of her death was brought to the White House by the farmer who delivered the morning milk. Manson wept unashamedly. She had been Mistress Carmichael's housekeeper for more than twenty years, and now she remembered only what she chose to remember, the happy times—the fuss and excitement of the young bride's arrival, the day Master Robert had been born, her mistress's kindnesses and her gaiety. Thirza also was genuinely grieved. She too had once loved Janet Carmichael, and she still remembered the thrill and the wonder of that childhood love. She thought immediately of Susan. Poor Susan, who was so gentle and defenceless, so dependent on her gay, tempestuous mamma.

Thirza's heart ached with sympathy for Susan, and she sat down there and then and wrote her a warm letter of sympathy. She sent it off, with a bouquet of lilies, to Carmichael House.

The flowers were returned later in the day, accompanied by a note in Susan's hand.

"Thank you for writing. We feel sorry that we are not able to keep the lovely flowers. Mother would not have liked it."

Thirza was shocked and distressed. She remembered the wreath that Janet Carmichael had sent at the time of her mother's death, and she remembered how she had disposed of it. She had to admit that there was a poetic justice in the Carmichaels' gesture, yet she had the uncomfortable feeling that they had returned the flowers, not as a gesture, but simply because they did not care to accept a tribute from such a person as herself. It was impossible to believe that Susan could ever be actuated by malice. . . .

She read the note several times, puzzled and uneasy, and unable to whip up any comfortable anger.

For the first time in years she searched her heart, and she did not altogether like what she found there. She began to wonder about herself. Was it possible that she had set up false standards for herself? Had she become ruthless and unscrupulous? Was she perhaps even . . . a hypocrite? Had she really turned into the sort of person that Susan obviously thought her?

John MacPherson set her mind at ease.

He had been reporting a Town Council meeting, and, as usual, he called at the White House on his way home to give her the news. The meeting had been about the harbour. The new harbour was one of Thirza's dearest dreams. She had set her heart on a new, enlarged harbour which would take even steamships at all states of the tide and into which the fishing fleet could run with safety before a nor'-east or a nor'-westerly gale.

The Town Council had this evening provisionally agreed to the plans, and had sent off copies to the appropriate Government departments.

"Findlay was very eloquent," John MacPherson told her. "It all depends on the Government now. On the size of the grant they're prepared to make us. If it's at all a reasonable amount, I'm certain that Findlay can talk the rest of them into agreeing to have the work started straightway on the West Pier."

She nodded, pleased. "Was anything said about Mistress Carmichael?"

"Not officially. Everybody was talking of her death, of course. Carmichael sent me some notes for her obituary to-day."

"Trumpets?"

"No," John said. "Very moderate and correct. He's not a fool, you know."

"I know," she said. "I wonder how he's taking this?"

"Well, I hear."

"He didn't love her. At least, not noticeably. But you never can tell, can you?"

"I suppose not."

She sighed audibly.

"Tired?"

"Yes. I'm . . . dispirited to-night." She looked at him in a quite unusual way, searching his eyes for reassurance. "John, about the harbour. Did it ever occur to you that the new harbour would be a great advantage to Skene's?"

"Yes," he said. "I do realise that, of course. But it would be of value to us all. In the early stages the fishing business might profit most, but the whole community is bound up with the fishing. If the fishing prospers we all prosper. More money for the shopkeepers. More work for every kind of workman. More cases for the lawyers and surgeons. More copies of the *Kaysie Advertiser* sold."

."But seriously," she insisted. "You do seriously think that the new harbour would be a boon to the.town?"

"I know it."

She toyed with the embroidered hem of her cuff. "You don't think that in supporting the new harbour I am being . . . selfish, perhaps?"

"Of course not."

"How can you be so sure?"

Their eyes met and held.

"Because I know you."

Indeed, he did not. But he thought he did. He believed that he and she were of a common mould, that her tender heart was moved, as his always was, by inequality and injustice, that his noble ideals were hers, and that her work—all her unstinting labour

of the past few years—was the work of a lonely and talented woman who had devoted her life to the service of the community.

And, listening to him, basking in his admiration, catching his spark, becoming fired by his faith and his compassion, she was completely reassured. She had no difficulty in persuading herself that she was as he thought her. She was a good and remarkable woman, an idealist, a visionary. If ever a heart was in the right place hers was. She felt it swelling with righteous indignation against those who, for their own selfish interests, would deprive the people of Kaysie of their rights in this wonderful Age of Progress. Of course they must have a harbour. Ay, and a telegraph office too. And a new respectable Free Kirk. A bigger and better school. A playfield for the bairns. She was alight with altruism, and the altruistic project which most inflamed her imagination was the building of the new harbour. In time it would mean hundreds of pounds a year to Skene's. . . .

It was a beautiful evening, and she walked, bare-headed, down the drive with John. Nowadays it was only when they walked together that she noticed his limp. She had learned that the unforgivable crime was to appear to notice it, and therefore she always took pains to show him that she was quite unaware of it by walking as fast as she could.

They were both a little out of breath when they reached the gates, and they were glad of an excuse to stop on the cliff road and look out across the Bay. The view made an admirable excuse.

There had been rain earlier; the sky was drained and clear, the air notably clean, and the faint, pleasing scent of the earth's mould was all around them. Below, the sea was smooth and placid, and the boats of the herring fleet, moving imperceptibly out to the fishing-grounds, resembled huge-winged insects trapped in oil. The late sun touched the sprawling Fishertown into unfamiliar pastel colours and here and there struck at a window with a blaze of orange.

"A fine night," John said.

"Yes," she said, turning a glowing face to him. "Sort of night in which it's glorious to be alive."

They looked at each other in sudden doubt.

"Well," John said. "Time I was going. See you again soon."

"Yes," she said. "Soon. Good night, John."

"Good night, Thirza."

And that was all.

She watched him jolt down the cliff road towards the town. He did not look back. She watched him intently, noting the swinging movement of his shoulders and the irregular dip in his stride as he took the crest of the hill. She watched him disappear little by little —his legs, his shoulders, and, finally, his head. She smiled, thinking, "Even his head limps." And she went on smiling long after he had gone, held by secret thoughts, staring sightlessly across the Bay in the direction of the boats.

After a little she realised that it was getting cool and, still smiling, her eyes stamped gently with thought, she turned and walked back towards the house.

She was grateful to John. Immensely grateful. "I don't know what I'd do without him," she said.

She walked faster, crunching her shoes into the gravel of the drive, swivelling on the balls of her feet. She swung her arms and felt the weight of her body with conscious pleasure. . . .

She could not help wondering sometimes about John.

About John and herself.

She laughed aloud. Everybody wondered. Manson, the Dominie, the maids. The whole town. Everybody. They watched and wondered, and she saw them wondering. Ah, well, she wondered too. . . .

She ran up the steps humming, and skipped into the back drawing-room.

Manson was sitting by the fire, her face lowered over her embroidery. She did not look up, and Thirza suddenly remembered that on the morning of this glorious evening Janet Carmichael had died.

(2)

That year, the year that Janet Carmichael died, was a landmark in Thirza's life, for it was then that she laid the foundations of her fortune.

It was a time for expansion and new ventures, for experiment and risk. It was a time of raging Imperialism and unbounded com-

mercial optimism. It was a time when merchant adventurers became rich overnight. Thirza Skene was one of them.

During the course of this one year she launched a dozen new projects. She broke new ground by sending a cargo of cured herrings to the Bahamas. She had a new, improved salt imported from Lisbon. She developed a new method of preserving ice. She financed a new and successful type of fishing-boat. And, most important of all, she started the offal business, which was the cornerstone of all her prosperity, and which resulted in Skene's becoming the biggest and most powerful fishing business in the north of Scotland.

The idea originated in one of the Dominie's papers: *The Utilisation of Fish Offal.*

When Thirza came across it she was puzzled, having no recollection of ever having ordered the Dominie to investigate so unlikely a subject. But, reading on, she became interested, and, as a result of the Dominie's suggestions, sent off a series of letters to the Fishery Board in Edinburgh, to the Marine Biological Association, to the *Deutscher Seefischereiverein,* and to analysts in Edinburgh and London. The combined replies encouraged her to believe that there was money to be made out of offal, and she began immediately to conduct experiments.

The results were beyond her most extravagant expectations.

From five tons of herring garbage she succeeded in producing two tons of good, dark-coloured oil. This fish oil was extremely valuable. The best of it could be used for medicinal purposes and the remainder sold to the tanneries for currying leather. It fetched from £15 to £50 a ton.

Nor was this all.

When the oil was removed from the garbage, the remaining phosphates and salts were found to be in much better condition for immediate application to the soil. Thus, in addition to the oil, Thirza produced from the original five tons of offal some two tons of manure, and this she was able to market at £3 a ton.

She realised that there was a mint of money to be made, and immediately pressed on with arrangements to conduct a major industry. She threw up buildings and invested in expensive machinery.

"Thirza's Folly," they called it in the town. You had only to mention it to raise a laugh, and even the builders had their sallies on the sly.

Thirza bore the jokes with fortitude. She took comfort in her account books. At the end of the first year she had treated 1,300 tons of offal. She had sold 500 tons of fish oil for £7,400 and 625 tons of manure for £1,875. Her marketing costs and working expenses, including her initial outlay for premises and machinery, amounted to £4,660.

She had made a profit of almost £5,000.

And that was only the first year. Once the business was in full swing she estimated that she would be able to treat four or five times as much offal. She did not see how she could fail to show a profit of less than fifteen thousand a year.

Before anyone else had appreciated the extent of the new industry she had cornered the market. She had entered into long-term agreements with curers in all parts of the country to supply her with their refuse, and every train that steamed into Kaysie bore its truckload of "stinking fish" for Skene's.

At long last, though no one yet knew it, she was cock of the walk.

(3)

Meantime she had another equally lucrative side-line up her sleeve.

Two or three times a year Captain Stullen's clipper, the *Foolish Virgin,* would put into the Bay. It would lie well out to sea, awaiting the time and the signal. Then, on a dark night, it would nose into the little bay below the White House and, on a prearranged bearing, sink a *crop* of rum and wines. At the same time a small boat, with oars blackened and muffled, would row out to the Yankee ship and return soon after, weighted to the gunwales, with tobacco and silks and tea.

But the liquor was the real business.

The day after a *crop* had been sunk Skene's crabbers would go to work. The folks of the Fishertown across the Bay saw them toiling in their small boat at low tide, hauling in the pots, and thought nothing of it. Crabbers had worked that creek for as long

as anybody could remember and would, no doubt, for a hundred years to come. No one spared them a thought, and they were able to grapple at their leisure for the weighted kegs, all joined to a single *sinking rope*, which Stullen's men had jettisoned from the *Foolish Virgin*.

Once the *sinking rope* was found, it was a simple task to remove the barrels, one by one, and to stow them under the gear in the small boat. In this way, working openly at daybreak and at dusk, Skene's crabbers were able to clear a whole *crop* in two or three days.

Thirza had no difficulty in finding a market for the goods that Stullen brought her. She had succeeded in obtaining a licence for a public-house to sell spiritous liquors in the Fishertown, and the new *Mariners' Arms* served as a mouth into which she shovelled most of Stullen's smuggled rum. The licence stood in the name of William Donald, her manager's older brother, and only the two Donalds knew that Mistress Skene was the real owner. There was no local market for the wines, and Thirza disposed of them farther afield, packing the kegs inside herring barrels, padded with straw and sawdust, and transporting them, labelled as herrings, to her associates in various parts of the country.

It never seriously occurred to Thirza that smuggling was wrong. She regarded it, at the worst, as an act against the State, and she had no respect for the State. She had an ancient account to settle with it. She still remembered what it had done to her poor brother Andrew, and when she had succeeded in getting a *crop* safely ashore, she felt the sort of satisfaction that a small boy feels who has cocked a snook at a town officer.

But though she had no conscience about smuggling, she did sometimes have fears. She knew that respectable women did not engage in large-scale smuggling enterprises, and, for her respectability's sake, she was always on tenterhooks until a *crop* was cleared. Afterwards, she was exultant, greedy for bigger and better hauls.

Since the opening of her offal business she had had all the money she needed, not only for the expansion of Skene's, but also for her expensive campaign against the Moray Frith. She had money to burn. She had now no excuse for continuing her dangerous partner-

ship with Stullen, yet she could not bring herself to give it up. The danger fascinated her, had become necessary to her life.

One thing she would gladly have given up. That was the need to see Stullen. She was of the opinion—and she kept pointing it out—that their business could be carried on entirely by correspondence.

Stullen disagreed. He would commit nothing to paper.

"It's all very well for you," she said hotly. "You *enjoy* these midnight visits."

"Granted, ma'am."

It infuriated her to be laughed at.

"But even if I didn't . . . enjoy these visits, as you put it, ma'am, I still wouldn't put pen to paper."

"And why not, if I may ask?"

"Because I don't aim to hang."

She had to grant him that letters were dangerous. But she held to her opinion that a visit from him was more dangerous than any letter ever could be.

He would arrive at the most unlikely times, always at night, and usually when she least expected him. He would climb up to the balcony and knock on the shutters until she admitted him. Once, she had been very angry and had refused to let him in. It had made no difference. He had merely forced the shutters, and she had had the greatest difficulty, when contemplating the damage next day, in making up a story that would satisfy Manson. Since that day she had had steel shutters fixed on her bedroom window so that he could not force an entry. She rarely fastened them, however. When the shutters were bolted the room got very stuffy. And she liked air. . . .

As a compromise she had a bell-cord fixed discreetly on each wall of her boudoir. The bell rang in Manson's room, and it was her intention, in the event of necessity, to summon Manson to her aid.

That was her honest intention.

In fact, however, Captain Stullen was so quick and masterful that she seldom had a chance to pull a bell, and on the few occasions when she did have the chance, she was restrained from doing so by her excessive modesty. She could not bear to let anyone, even Manson, see her in such extremity.

On the whole, she preferred to take her medicine. There were times, however, when, limp and exhausted at the end of their intercourse, she contrived to snatch at a bell-cord and thus clearly to imply, to herself as well as to Stullen, that had she had the opportunity she would have done so, not now when it was too late, but earlier and in time. In this way she preserved a modicum of self-respect.

Stullen was an enigma to her. The more she saw of him the less she understood him, and this continually irritated and intrigued her. She was not accustomed to being baffled by people. She liked to assess and label them, and she could do neither with Stullen. At first she had thought him merely a bully, and then, as she had felt the texture of his mind, she had come to realise that he was not only a clever but an educated man, with a more intimate knowledge of men and affairs and a wider range of interests than anyone she had ever met. She had reason to suspect that he even knew something of the arts of music and painting, subjects which were considered womanish in Kaysie and of which she herself knew nothing. Sometimes he would make a chance remark that so pleased and stimulated her that she found herself anxious to have his point of view and would have liked to start a serious discussion. But Captain Stullen was not to be drawn. He was willing enough to talk business, but that was all. Once their business was disposed of, he regarded talk with her as a waste of time, and did not trouble to disguise it. She was forced to admit to herself that he had no interest in her mind. None whatsoever. It was most humiliating.

She was fascinated by Stullen, but could make nothing of him. She would decide that he was utterly evil, and then, disarmed by the very flagrancy of his admissions, she would begin to wonder, aghast at the implications of the thought, whether he was not the most honest person she had ever met. She could not understand him, yet could not leave it at that. She was convinced that there must be a key somewhere, and that if she could find it she could reduce Stullen to an understandable denominator; and so she went on studying him, watching and wondering, trying to measure him by her own conventional standards and piqued and perplexed when she found them wanting.

CHAPTER VI

(1)

IN SEPTEMBER OF THE FOLLOWING year the chance for which Thirza had been waiting at last presented itself. She got word in the form of a cryptic letter from Mr. Craig, of the Moray Frith, that Mr. Carmichael was hard pressed and was considering taking out a mortgage on Carmichael House.

She was galvanised into action. That same day she took the train to Aberdeen and had a long consultation with Mr. Johnstone, of Johnstone & Johnstone, Solicitors, Crown Street. As a result, in rather less than a week a Mr. Brownlie, one of her agents in Aberdeen, held, on her behalf, the title-deeds to Carmichael House.

And then, before she had revealed to anyone that she held the mortgage, she received an unexpected and most unwelcome visitor —Mr. Robert Carmichael.

She had not spoken to Robert since leaving Carmichael House, and she had no wish to speak to him now, but he was awaiting her in the front parlour, where Manson, all of a dither, had escorted him, and she had no choice but to receive him. She was mildly curious. She presumed that he had come as an ambassador from his father, and she wondered what dodge the old fox was up to now. Well, she would soon know. . . . She opened the parlour door and went in.

Robert was standing at the window with his back to her, and although he must have heard her enter, he did not turn until she spoke, and then his movements were slow and casual, as if he was perfectly at home here and she was someone who had left the room only a few minutes before.

They stood examining each other.

Thirza had seen him occasionally in the years since she left Carmichael House, but only at a distance. Now she was surprised to see how little resemblance he bore to the young man she remem-

bered. The years had not dealt kindly with him. Although he could not have been much more than thirty, his hair had already retreated to the crown of his head, and the great naked dome of his forehead contrasted oddly with the little peaked, receding chin. The rosebud mouth which had seemed sweet in the boy was incongruous in the man, and although the eyes were still the imperious eyes of Richard Carmichael, the total impression was of weakness and self-indulgence, of a spoiled child who had grown old without growing up. He was dressed in the very height of fashion—a big cravat, wide lapels, tight-waisted coat, and immaculate dove-grey trousers. He looked a very fine gentleman.

"Mistress Skene?"

She inclined her head.

Robert stared at her with the curious Carmichael stare, inquisitive and yet impersonal, as if he were a scientist examining some rare but distasteful specimen.

"We have met before, I believe."

"Yes," she said, smiling in spite of herself. "Won't you sit down?"

"No, thank you." He continued to study her, quite without embarrassment, and then, apparently having seen all that he wished to see, he half-turned away, stroked his smooth chin, and gazed out at the window. "You have an excellent view here."

"Yes, it's very fine. The hills of Sutherland are quite clear across the Bay on a sunny day."

"Indeed," he said.

She was ill at ease, and, accordingly, irritated. She had to grope for words. "I trust Miss Susan is well."

"She has a migraine," Robert said. "She is always having migraines. But I think she is well enough." He turned to face her, again subjecting her to a long, disinterested inspection. "No doubt you are wondering why I have come to see you?"

She nodded.

"I see no point in beating about the bush, madam. I have come to make you a proposition. The competition between your businesses and the various interests of my father have reached a stage when it is of no benefit to either of you. I have given the matter some thought in the past few months, and I have come to the conclusion that an amalgamation is the only reasonable solution."

Thirza said mildly, "That is hardly a new idea. It has been put to me repeatedly by the managers of the Moray Frith."

"But not on my terms."

"And what are your terms?" she asked, amused.

"Marriage."

"I beg your pardon? You mean . . . am I to take it you mean . . . you are proposing marriage to me?"

"Precisely. It's the obvious solution."

She was so taken aback that she actually opened her mouth and gaped at him.

"I must admit," Robert said, "that at first the idea did not . . . er . . . particularly appeal to me, but the more I thought of it the more convinced I became that there was no other way out of the impasse, and, after all, such a compromise need not be unduly distasteful to either of us. We are civilised human beings, and I have no doubt that with the exercise of a little tact and tolerance we can devise a formula of living which will prove satisfactory to us both. The advantages of such a marriage are so obvious that I need hardly point them out."

"Nevertheless," she said meekly, "nevertheless, point them out."

"Commercially," Robert said. "No more competition. A monopoly in everything connected with the fishing. Socially, well"—he smiled in a deprecating way, contriving admirably to convey the impression that this was the sort of thing one did not talk about—"I fancy you can have no difficulty in perceiving the advantages this marriage would bring to you."

"And to you?" she enquired.

"We need not go into that," he said. "I have considered all the pros and cons, and I am prepared to marry you."

She almost giggled.

"These social advantages that you imply I would gain . . . would you mind giving me some idea of them, Mr. Carmichael?"

He sighed. He found this very tedious. "My family," he said, drawling. "The name. You know, you ought to know, I think, that we live, have always lived on a scale"—his eyes moved around the room, assessing it, and, having assessed it, dismissing it—"on a scale somewhat higher than that to which most people are accustomed. One does not wish to be offensive. . . ."

"No no, of course not, Mr. Carmichael. Please go on."

". . . But I really think, Mistress Skene, that you are yourself sufficiently intelligent to be able to understand, without my assistance, precisely what I mean. The advantages which my name would bring to you hardly require to be mentioned between us."

She would have liked to laugh, but couldn't. It suddenly didn't seem funny any more. He was so sure of himself, so insolently superior, so offensive, so bored. . . . There, he was actually stifling a yawn, or affecting to, touching his lips with elegantly manicured fingers. She took a deep breath.

"Did your father send you to propose to me, Mr. Carmichael?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I asked if your father sent you here."

"Certainly not."

"But he knew of your intention?"

"Well . . . yes."

"And approved?"

"Yes," he admitted.

She nodded, having resolved a doubt. "Do you yourself take an active interest in your father's affairs?"

"Lord, no. Business bores me."

"Then you don't know your father's financial position?"

"I say," Robert said. "I don't care for this, you know. I hardly think that I ought to be exposed to this sort of cross-examination."

"I shall not expose you to anything for very long," Thirza said. "I presume that at least you know enough of your father's affairs to appreciate that he is on the verge of bankruptcy. . . ."

"I say, this is preposterous. . . ."

"No," she said. "Don't interrupt me for a minute. You can say all you want to when I finish. You are aware no doubt that this proposal of yours . . . this act of self-sacrifice . . . would carry some slight benefit to yourself, but you obviously cannot be aware of the extent of it. I could buy your father up to-morrow if I had a mind to."

"My dear Mistress Skene! Please, please, no vulgarity."

She said, "It bewilders me that anyone—even you, Mr. Carmichael—could be so insolent as to come here and make this suggestion in this particular way to me. How dare you be so superior

and so patronising! How dare you come here with your corsets and your fine airs to condescend to offer me your hand! Do you imagine that you have anything . . . anything at all to offer me? You appear, for some reason that quite escapes me, to be very proud of your name. You had better make the most of it, Mr. Carmichael, for, as far as I can see, it is all you have left."

"I gather, then," Robert said, still drawling, still bored, "that the answer is in the negative."

"If ever I married again," she said bitingly, "I would marry a *man*."

He raised his shoulders in ennui.

"You can go home and tell your father so." It made her increasingly angry that she, who ought to have had complete control of this scene, had lost her temper while Robert remained supremely unruffled and unconcerned. "At least your father, for all his faults, was a man. And what he must think of you I hate to imagine. You can tell him from me that this idea of his of marrying you off to me is even more offensive to me than all his other shady tricks. Tell him," she said, spluttering, "that I would as soon marry a goldfish."

"Is that all?" Robert enquired.

"It's enough, is it not?"

"Quite enough," he said politely. "And now, Mistress Skene, I don't think anything remains except for me to bid you good day."

Now she had made a fool of herself. And he, in his condescending superiority, had contrived to put her in the wrong. She rang for the maid. "One minute, Mr. Carmichael," she said, halting him at the door. "There is still something that remains to be said. Are you aware that Carmichael House has been mortgaged?"

She had captured his attention at last.

"I hardly think that is your affair, madam."

"I think it is."

"Indeed?"

Their eyes clashed.

"In view of the fact," she said, her voice suddenly very soft and sweet, "that I hold the title-deeds. I think that is something else you should tell your father."

She had no doubt that she had won the last round, but she

gained little satisfaction from it. She was thoroughly ashamed of herself. When Robert had gone she paced the room in exasperation, thinking how badly she had behaved, thinking of all the gracious (and therefore far more cutting) things she might have said. She had not acted as a lady should. She was very mortified, and after a little, to her own great surprise, she crawled into William's big arm-chair and wept.

(2)

Some days after this visit there was another and much more momentous happening. A stranger, a tall, emaciated, bearded man whom no one had ever seen before, arrived in Kaysie off the Aberdeen train and presented himself at the house in the Fishertown which had once been occupied by the Gares. Mistress Alexander, who now lived there, opened the door to him, and he spoke a sentence to her which reverberated round the town.

He said, "Where's my mother?"

It was Andrew Gare.

A body of fisherfolk escorted him triumphantly to the White House, and in the peculiar circumstances Manson felt she had no choice but to invite them all in. Thirza, unfortunately, was not at home, being on a visit to the offal works. A messenger was sent for her (he missed her by taking a short cut over the cliff) and the company was uneasily entertained by Manson and rather more enthusiastically by the Dominie, who immediately perceived that this was an occasion, and who took it upon himself to lift the keys of the wine cellar from Manson's room and to carry up (after some preliminary sampling) a case containing twelve bottles of whisky.

Andra much impressed the company by refusing to touch liquor and by quoting the Scriptures in support of his abstinence, but he was not proof against the Dominie's cajolery, and he finally allowed himself to be persuaded to have a "wee one." The Dominie's "wee ones" were notorious. Two were enough for Andra. By the time Thirza arrived the drawing-room was in disorder, and the hero of the day was so incapable that he had to be raised bodily from the carpet to be introduced to her.

It was not a propitious meeting. Neither recognised the other, and the sudden change of position upset Andra's stomach, and he

was sick. He was carried upstairs by a dozen willing helpers and, owing to the prevailing confusion, deposited in the Dominie's bed.

Next morning brother and sister met and addressed each other for the first time in over twenty years. They had no sooner shaken hands than Andra, fixing her with a bloodshot but earnest eye, plunged into the story of his life.

It was a pathetic tale.

Andra had been shipped with several hundred other convicts, many of them hardened criminals, to Van Diemen's Island. The convicts were battened down below deck like beasts, and the only times they saw daylight or smelled fresh air were when the hatches were opened twice daily for food to be tossed down and the rather longer period once a week when the dead—and there were many—were cleared out of the hold, to be ditched overboard like refuse.

On arrival at Tasman's Peninsula in Van Diemen's Land, only some six hundred of the original eight hundred convicts were alive, and they were mostly in a sorry condition. Andra himself was so ill of dysentery that he could not even raise himself on all fours, and his body was covered with sores from some obscure skin disease.

It was his weakness that saved his life.

He was not fit to be sent to a Penal Station or to be committed to a chain gang. He was allowed to remain under canvas at what was called a Probation Station, and here, after some weeks on his back, he was put to work as an orderly, assisting the cooks, scrubbing out the warders' houses, tending the pitiful cases in "the hospital." After some months of this he was sent up-country with a road party.

Again, poor health saved him.

He was barely strong enough to lift the pick they gave him, and he collapsed twice during the first week on the road. He was merely a liability to the road boss, who got rid of him by handing him over to a local farmer. This farmer was himself an ex-convict, an old man now and deeply religious, an ex-convict who had seen the error of his ways and who was now determined, by hook or by crook, or, if need be, by sheer brute force to instil the holy spirit into everyone with whom he came in contact. He had no difficulty in persuading Andra that he too was a miserable sinner, and they spent most of

their time, when not actually at work, in praying together and in lugubriously confessing their past sins and omissions.

Andra remained with this old farmer for seven years, and then, when the old man died, he crossed Bass Strait into Australia. He worked in many different jobs, always in conditions of great hardship, drifting from Victoria to New South Wales, and finally to Queensland.

In Brisbane he signed on as cook on a small schooner in return for his passage to New Zealand. He worked for a time as a labourer around Wellington, and he would have been content to stay there, but one day, in broad daylight, he was brutally shanghaied and shipped aboard a brig bound for Rio de Janeiro. The voyage round the Horn nearly killed him, and he deserted at the first opportunity, at Montevideo.

Here he found a ship bound for Tilbury. He signed on as a deck-hand, and at last, some three months later, set foot, after an exile of twenty years, on British soil. Even then his troubles were not over, and it had taken him two pitiful years to work his way from London to Kaysie.

Thirza watched him intently. She remembered Andra with a child's memory. She had vivid and perfect pictures of him as he had once been, and as he spoke she caught occasional glimpses of the boy she had known. But it was hard, after this long time, to accept this stranger as her brother, to substitute for the merry, rosy-cheeked boy who had never grown up this gaunt, wretched man with the hollow cheeks and the staring eyes. At first she listened with rapt attention to the terrible story of his life, but there was too much of it and it was far too terrible. Nothing amusing, nothing pleasant had ever happened to Andra, and her imagination could not cope with the unrelieved tale of horror upon horror. She listened for a time to the sound of his voice, marvelling at the blend of local idioms and foreign intonation, but soon she had had a surfeit of that too, and she just sat glassy-eyed, waiting for him to stop.

Andra did not notice. He was intent on telling all. There was no detail too small to be omitted, and if he felt that she had not perceived the significance of a missing button, he went back and enlarged upon it. By lunch-time his ship had just arrived at Van Diemen's Island and Andra was lying parched and semi-conscious

in the hold below the dead body of a man by the name of Matthews, and this man Matthews, she might like to know, had been sentenced at Lincoln Assizes for the theft of a spoon. A wooden spoon, mark you. And do you know who had accused him of stealing it? His own brother-in-law! . . .

It was a great relief to Thirza when the gong sounded for lunch. She got to her feet and stretched her cramped limbs. "Poor Andra, I didn't know that anyone could suffer so much," she said.

"My sufferings have been as the sufferings of Job," Andra replied. "And, like Job, I have sinned not, nor charged God foolishly. I have held fast my integrity."

"I'm sure you have, Andra," Thirza said. "And now we must go and have something to eat."

Andra was given the seat at the head of the table, and immediately assumed the responsibilities of his place. He pounded the table with a dessert-spoon, to the great alarm of the ladies, and announced in sepulchral tones that he was about to say the grace. He spoke for twenty minutes, and was obviously so carried away by religious fervour and so oblivious to his circumstances that he might have spoken for a further twenty minutes had not Manson, who had been restrained until then only by Thirza's most imperious glances, brusquely terminated the homily by announcing that she smelled the joint burning.

They ate in silence, Manson bridling and Andra offended.

When the meal was over Thirza escaped to her office to catch up with the day's work, but in less than half an hour Andra had tracked her down, and, pacing up and down her room, continued his recital from the point where he had left off.

It was two days before he felt she had sufficient grasp of his life story for him to be able to indulge in curiosity of his own, and then he said, "And what has been happening to you, Thirza? I believe that you married a prosperous man."

"Yes," she said.

He looked around the room as if noting its furnishings for the first time, and, his curiosity sated, hastened to tell her of something he had just remembered—a most unfortunate experience which had befallen him while working as a weaver's clerk in Melbourne. . . .

Andra was a sore trial. Having delivered himself of the detailed

account of all his adventures, he began to take note of his surroundings and to pass judgment on them. He declared unequivocally that Kaysie had become a town of publicans and sinners, and he was so convinced of his mission to save souls that he would stop even strangers in the street to admonish and warn them "in the words of Jehovah."

At home he was no less active. He was a thorn in everyone's flesh and proud of it. There were days when he fasted and days (all too seldom in Manson's opinion) when, because of some trifling "sin," he denied himself the consolation of speech. Then he would communicate by cards. He had a wide assortment of these cards, covering every occasion and ranging from "MORE SOUP, IF YOU PLEASE," to the tart reminder "THAT WHICH IS HIGHLY ESTEEMED AMONG MEN IS AN ABOMINATION IN THE SIGHT OF GOD: Matthew xxiii. 12." On the conclusion of a period of silence he would roam the house, prophesying dark doom and castigating all and sundry for their sins, and it was not an uncommon event for the maids to be in full flight before him.

The well-ordered routine of the White House gave way to confusion and chaos, with everyone increasingly harassed and badtempered. In order to take some of the strain off the ladies the Dominie was promoted to eating in the dining-room. By contrast with Andra the Dominie, despite the eccentricity of his table-manners, could be considered almost normal, and he was fully aware of his social superiority. For a few days he allowed Andra to talk at him unchecked, and then he began, gently and patronisingly, to enter into religious disputations. This was not to Andra's liking, and scenes became so frequent and so violent that Manson refused to be a witness to the disorder and insisted on taking her meals alone in her room. Thirza would have liked to have done the same, but her pride would not allow her to be driven from her own dining-room.

She would not criticise or permit Andra to be criticised in her hearing. She begged Manson to be patient and cajoled the maids to suffer him. She felt sure that after a little he would settle down, find some interest in Kaysie, and prove himself a rational and worthy citizen. She had even thoughts of making him an under-manager in one of her businesses, and she conducted him round

the yard, the Offal Factory, the Ropery, the Sail-loft, and the Ship-building Yard in the hope of kindling his interest in one or other of her many activities.

Andra was indeed interested, but not in the way she had hoped. He was fascinated and shocked at the extent of her "Empire," and from that time on his most violent disapproval was directed at his sister and all her works. He sought an ally in his crusade against Thirza where he thought he had most chance of finding one, in the Minister. But Andra's brand of individualistic evangelism did not appeal to Whisky Johnny, and the Minister would have nothing to do with him.

"The chiel's far ower holy for me," he said.

Andra decided that organised religion, like everything else, had gone over to mammon, yea, had become inhabited of the very Devil, and so, in the public interest, he began to conduct services of his own in the open air in the Fishertown.

He would march through Kaysie in the early evening, a striking figure with a Bible in his hand and a soap-box under his arm. His ravaged face aloft so that he might see nothing of the sin and corruption around him, he stalked with long springy strides along the Shore until he came to the foot of the Slope, close to the Gares' old home. There he would lay down the box, place it with solemn deliberation, climb on top of it, and begin to read from the Bible.

At first he waited for a crowd to gather before beginning his sermons proper, but as the fisherfolk became accustomed to him, they became less willing to listen, and his audiences diminished to such an extent that he had sometimes to be content with a single adult listener and a handful of children. Sometimes he talked of himself and his troubles, tears pouring down the deep groves in his cheeks. But usually he would attack mammon. The mammon of unrighteousness. The mammon for which he, an innocent lad, had been sold into bondage. The mammon, that greed of filthy lucre, for which the folks of Kaysie, and in particular his own misguided sister, were at this moment selling their immortal souls. He found his favourite texts in Revelations, and the one he used most of all was:

"*And I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.*

"*And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication:*

"*And upon her forehead was a name written,* MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH."

"Brethren," Andra would say, his voice rasping with menace, "Babylon is also the name for this accursed town of Kaysie."

At the first stroke of eight on the Auld Kirk clock Andra drew his discourse to an end, gathered up his box and Bible, and, followed part of the way by an awed and respectful train of children, stalked back to Kaysie. By a quarter to nine each evening he had washed and anointed his hands, plastered down the dank black lock of hair which decorated his forehead, and taken his seat in the dining-room. There was never any reprieve for Thirza and the Dominie. Andra was always there waiting for them, and as they approached the dining-room they would hear him declaiming to the empty room as he limbered up his voice, preparing for a flying start the moment they or anyone else opened the door.

Entertaining a dozen or twenty guests to a dinner-party had become one of the features of Thirza's life. She and Manson had taken infinite pains with these parties, and it was generally recognised that for sumptuousness and propriety there had never been anything in Kaysie to compare with them. Now this, and most of her other pleasures, had to go by the board, for it was out of the question to entertain with Andra in the White House. He had taken possession of it. Doors were locked which had never been locked before, and behind them conversations were conducted in whispers, with all ears cocked for the sound of Andra's footsteps.

It was an intolerable situation and one which could not be allowed to continue, and yet Thirza temporised, anxious to get rid of him, yet reluctant, after all he had suffered, to cast him adrift again.

If it had not been for Andra's presence in the house life at this time would have been particularly pleasant, for the cracks were now showing plaining in the Moray Frith business edifice, and all her ambitions were coming together to fruition. Only the previous

week it had been discreetly intimated to her that the directors of the Moray Frith were prepared to accept offers for the sales of their ropery and their shipbuilding yard, and this presented a most interesting problem. Should she buy these businesses—she had no doubt she could have them on her own terms—or should she merely allow them to continue to decompose? Both had better sites than her own rival businesses which had ruined them. Would it pay her to discontinue her own businesses and, with her own workpeople and her own methods, to operate the Moray Frith's instead?

And there was another pleasing problem, which was not yet urgent, but which would soon require a decision. What was she to do with Carmichael House? She would shortly have the opportunity of foreclosing, and, as a result, she was confident she would find herself with Carmichael House on her hands. It was an intoxicating thought.

To emphasise her good fortune, the *Foolish Virgin,* after an absence of more than nine months, had that very morning been sighted in the Bay, and soon, on the first dark night, would be stealing into the creek to jettison yet another rich *crop* of wines and spirits. Soon, too, Captain Stullen would be paying her one of his regrettable, but always interesting, visits. It was a most satisfactory world, in which everything occurred just as she ordained it. It was the best of all possible worlds, and a joy to be alive in it.

And then, unexpectedly, on this serene horizon there appeared a small and insignificant cloud. There was nothing ominous about it, and she had no means of knowing that it was the forerunner of a mighty storm which was to rage and revolve around her, and finally, in violent crescendo, to uproot her from this best of all possible worlds.

CHAPTER VII

(1)

THEY WERE AT DINNER ONE evening that week—Thirza, Andra, and the Dominie—when Nellie the maid came in to whisper that Mr. MacPherson was here and would like to see her.

Thirza raised her eyebrows. It was most unlike John to interrupt her at a meal, and she had an immediate presentiment of trouble.

She got up at once and went through to the sun-parlour.

John was pacing the hearth-rug, but he stopped short when she opened the door, thrust his hand through his hair, and grinned at her. "Hullo."

"Hullo, John," she said. She was not deceived by the smile: she was watching his eyes. "Won't you sit down?"

"I'd rather stand, I think. I'm not staying. I just came to bring you the news."

"Something's happened, then?" she said. She sat down deliberately, making a play with the folds of her skirts, steeling herself for she knew not what calamity.

"Yes, I'm afraid it has. The *Advertiser* has been sold."

She nearly said, "Is that all?" She sat blinking at him, reorientating her thoughts. She had imagined it to be some matter that concerned her directly. She had even feared that he might somehow have got wind of her dealings with Stullen. She said, quite stupid with relief, "You mean the paper? Your paper, John?"

"Of course," he said. He was being very casual about it, still smiling, his voice even and ordinary, but now that she knew she did not need to be afraid on her own account, she was able to consider the situation dispassionately, and she saw at once that it might have serious consequences for John. She said thoughtlessly, "But surely they couldn't just sell the *Advertiser* like that. . . ."

"They have done."

She bit her lip. She had been very clumsy so far, and this was a situation which required careful handling, for, though the *Advertiser* meant only a few sheets of paper to her, it meant a great deal more to John. It had been his whole life. She said gently, "Tell me about it."

"The first I learned of it was this evening. Harkness—it was done through Harkness—sent a message across to the office. Said he had something important to communicate to me. I went across to see him. He told me that Mrs. Adamson had died the week before last in Edinburgh, and that the paper had been sold privately." Again that painful, undeceiving smile. "They didn't waste any time. I wasn't even told that Mrs. Adamson had died."

Thirza said, "And who has bought it?"

"I don't even know that. Harkness said he wasn't at liberty to tell me." He began to stalk the rug again, breathing hard, limping more noticeably than usual. "He was on his best town clerk behaviour. You can imagine, I think. He's never had much time for me, and he's never had much time for the paper. It wasn't exactly a pleasant interview."

"I must keep him talking," Thirza thought. She said, "But who could have bought it, John?"

"I've no idea."

"Who are the trustees, then?"

"I don't know that either. Harkness said he wasn't at liberty, etcetera, etcetera, although I gathered in a roundabout way that he himself was one of them. I imagine the rest are Edinburgh people. Mrs. Adamson hadn't connections up north here. It was the old man, old Joe Adamson, Generous Joe they called him, who belonged to Kaysie. It was he who started the *Advertiser*, you know."

"No, I didn't know," Thirza said. "Tell me about him."

"There's not much to tell. He was one of the old Whigs, plenty of money, and he started the paper originally to fight the Tories over Reform. He was keen as mustard on the paper. I remember, even after he sold his estate and went south—this was when I was just a boy in the front office—he used to write once a week with criticisms and suggestions, mostly criticisms. The paper and the paper's policy meant a lot to him, and when he died—it must be twenty years ago—he left the *Advertiser* to his widow on condition

that she did not sell it. Apparently he didn't make any provision for the paper on her death—he couldn't very well, I suppose, they hadn't any family—and there you are, that's all there is to it. The paper's been sold, presumably to the people who were Generous Joe Adamson's bitterest enemies—the very people he started the paper to fight. Sickening, isn't it? And now it's all theirs. Paper, presses, office, furniture, everything."

She thought she understood how he felt. For years he had had a completely free hand with the *Advertiser*. He had come to regard it as his own, and it would naturally be galling for him to have to submit to an employer, to write what he was told to write, to argue a point of view that might not be his own. It would be more than galling, it would be intolerable to a man like John. But she was determined to look on the bright side. She said, "But, John, perhaps the new owners will continue just as before. . . ."

He laughed shortly. "Harkness told me that there was to be a radical change of policy. . . ."

"Oh, John, I'm sorry!"

"Wait a minute. You haven't heard it all yet. A lot of people, Harkness said, have not been at all satisfied with my conduct of the *Advertiser* in recent years. . . ."

She could imagine Harkness saying it. She could hear the unction in his voice, see his smug little smirk at the end of his speech. She felt herself taut with anger.

"So much so," John continued, "that the new owners are dispensing with my services."

She stared at him, shocked and incredulous, and then indignant, and finally in bitter understanding. She was amazed at the strength of her feelings. She could not remember being so angry, and yet in the storm of emotions that now swept her it was not anger but some new bitter-sweet and unrecognisable feeling that predominated. That John, John of all people, should be treated in such a way! . . .

"Yes, Thirza," he said calmly, "it's true. I've been given notice. Harkness thought it would be convenient—that was the word he used—if I were to remain on as editor until a new man was appointed, but in the meantime it would be advisable, and he stressed this, for me to present the news objectively and to refrain

from editorial or other comment on matters of national or local controversy. He had his speech all prepared, and a pretty job he made of it. I resigned on the spot, of course."

"Oh, John," she said, "John, I'm so sorry!" The words were inadequate, but she had no others available. "It's all so . . . inexplicable. That Harkness should even dare to show his teeth like this! Of course, he'd be glad to prise you out of the *Advertiser*. I can understand that. He and the rest of that clique." She had a sudden, outrageous thought. "John," she said slowly, "could Carmichael have anything to do with this?"

"I don't know."

She said, "I'll wager it is Carmichael who has bought the paper." And, having said it, she was sure that she was right. She saw it all in a flash, the whole ingenious stratagem. The paper was the bargaining pawn. The *Kaysie Advertiser* versus Carmichael House. He would offer her the paper in exchange for the title-deeds. Oh, he was clever. A clever and a subtle rascal. She nodded to herself in confirmation. "Carmichael is at the bottom of this," she said aloud.

"Might be," John agreed.

"I know it's Carmichael's doing," she said.

"But, Thirza, it doesn't really matter who is responsible. What counts is that the paper is sold, and that the new owner is going to reverse the policy. That matters a very great deal." He had been walking in short, irregular steps backwards and forwards the length of the rug. Now he sat down, thrust his hand violently through his hair, leaned forward, and began to speak with great intensity. "It's not a matter only of politics, Thirza. It goes deeper than that. Ever since the *Advertiser* was founded, forty-nine years ago—this was the jubilee year, that's another pill for me—ever since it was founded it has stood for something that all of us who have ever been connected with it have been proud of. It's not easy to find a name for it. Call it a particular concept of social justice if you like. The *Advertiser* has always been independent, above politics in the narrow party sense. It has never taken any kind of whip. We've stood for freedom in the widest sense of the word—freedom for every single man and woman everywhere to think or act for him- or herself. Mind you, freedom with compromises. We've tried to strike a

balance between freedom on the one hand and a man's obligations to his fellows on the other. We've genuinely and to the very best of our ability tried to shape public opinion honestly and honourably. We've never been mixed up in any kind of shady business. Thirza, I'm talking like the worst kind of hectoring editorial, but I want you to understand this, to see the issues involved. I want you to appreciate what a tragedy this is, not for me personally—that doesn't matter except, perhaps, to me—but for Kaysie, for all of us everywhere who believe in truth and freedom and the ordinary human decencies. You do understand, don't you, Thirza?"

She nodded. She understood only that he was deeply wounded in the place where it hurt most. It had seemed quite unnecessary to understand more, and while he was talking she had not been attending, she had just been watching him and suffering with him. But now, since it seemed so important to him that she should follow his argument, she screwed up her eyes to show him that she was concentrating and listened attentively.

"And now, Thirza, the policy of the paper is to be changed. It means that henceforth the *Advertiser* will serve the interests of a clique. . . ."

"Carmichael," she said.

"Yes. Carmichael's type of policy, at any rate. Bigotry, shortsightedness, selfishness. It means dirty journalism—half-truths, suppression of vital facts. It means that the people of Kaysie and district who have depended for so long—for forty-nine years—on this paper to supply them with all the facts will now be deliberately misled. They will be told only what is thought good for them to know by intolerant and bigoted men whose only object is to safeguard their own interests. This is a proud victory, Thirza, for privilege and prejudice and all that the *Advertiser* has ever opposed. Maybe I'm exaggerating, maybe I'm putting it all too strongly. On the face of it it's only a change of ownership in an insignificant little country newspaper, but to me it's a disaster, it's a victory over the minds of men. Maybe I'm prejudiced myself. Of course this is a bitter blow for me personally, it's the end of everything I've worked for here in Kaysie all my life, and it's quite possible that I'm taking a distorted view. I don't know. I'm just not sure of anything at the moment except"—and she caught a flash of humour in

his eyes, a glimpse of the John she knew—"except that it's a relief to pass it all on, undigested, to you. What's the matter, Thirza? Why are you staring?"

"I'm sorry," she said, and she felt a blush start and could do nothing to check it. "Was I . . . am I staring? I didn't know. I was just . . . looking at you." Looking at you, she might have said, and seeing you clearly and properly for the first time in my life. Looking at you and seeing that you are lonely and unhappy, that you need help, and that I am the only person who can give it to you. Looking at you and realising for the first time in all those years that I love you and always have loved you. "I was thinking," she said. Her heart was thumping against her ribs, and she was possessed by a delicious and terrifying excitement. She stretched out a hand to the bell and said calmly, "Will you have a cup of tea or coffee, or would you rather have a glass of wine?"

"Nothing, thanks. I have to get back to the office. There's a lot to be done, and it's high time I was off. I didn't mean to stay so long. I only came in to give you the bad news."

"But this isn't really bad news," she said, groping hard for a cheerful approach. "And we haven't even begun to discuss it yet. You can't let them beat you like this. I know what you must do, John. You must start a new paper."

"Impossible."

"Why?"

He smiled ruefully. "Papers cost money, a great deal of money. The presses in particular are very expensive. And then there's all the overheads. . . ."

"But if the money could be raised?"

"Even if the money could be raised it still wouldn't be a practical proposition. There just isn't room for another newspaper in Kaysie, Thirza, and the *Advertiser* is too well established to be crowded out. It's been tried before. In the forties. You wouldn't remember. The *Chronicle,* they called it. I can't quite remember who the directors were, although I think Carmichael was one of them. It was that clique, anyway. They hired an editor from Edinburgh, a first-rate man, and they turned out a very good paper. They offered it at fourpence—the *Advertiser* was fivepence at the time—and then at threepence, and finally at tuppence. But they couldn't sell it. The

advertisers weren't interested, and the public wouldn't have it as a gift. People want what they're accustomed to, and the people of this district are accustomed to the *Advertiser* and want nothing but the *Advertiser*. No, Thirza, there just wouldn't be any point in starting up another paper in Kaysie. It could never compete with the old *Advertiser*."

She was not convinced, but she let it go at that. She had toyed momentarily with the idea of financing him in a new paper, but obviously this would not be so satisfactory as presenting him with the old. Yes, that was the solution. She would buy the *Advertiser*. She would pay whatever exorbitant sum Carmichael asked, and she would stipulate that John was to continue as editor and was to have complete charge of the paper. . . .

She sat savouring her power. Her money had never been so sweet to her as now, when it afforded her the opportunity of helping John. "The man I love," she said to herself. She looked across at him with her heart in her eyes. She would have given almost anything at that moment to have lifted the load of unhappiness off him, to have told him frankly that there was nothing to worry about, she was going to make everything come right. But she had the sense to realise that his pride would be up in arms and that she must not, dare not, even hint at it.

She said, "What are you going to do, I mean, personally, John?"

"I? I don't know. It doesn't seem to matter."

"It matters to me," she said gently.

Their eyes met, and she fancied she saw in his something of the same look that she knew to be in hers. But he did not hold the glance long enough for her to be sure. He brought his hands down sharply on his knees and stood up.

"I think I shall try to get a job in Aberdeen. They might take me on at the Free Press."

Her heart bled for him. She said, "You have to leave Kaysie?"

"Of course. What is there for me here?"

"Nothing, I suppose." She looked into the fire and sighed, intent on savouring each nuance of this bitter-sweet emotion. "I shall miss you, John."

"And I shall miss . . . my visits here."

"Will you, John?"

If only he had gone on looking at her! But no, he had turned away abruptly and was blundering towards the door, and she had no choice but to get up and follow him. She deliberately walked downstairs a step or two behind, her eyes devouring him.

She was in love. In love, in love, in love. Incredible that she had not realised it before! Dear John. Dear, dear John. Beloved.

He had stopped at the foot of the stairs to wait for her. She saw his hand on the banister rail and had an absurd desire to seize it and kiss it. His dear, thin, brown hand. She had to make a positive physical effort not to touch him. She felt quite irresponsible and inexpressibly happy.

"I see you have another new rug in the hall," John said.

"Yes," she said, "it's a Shiraz."

"It's very beautiful."

"I'm glad you like it," she said.

Words! How silly to be staring at and talking of a rug when her body could hardly contain this urgent heart of hers, when every fibre of her being cried out for him.

They were at the front door now. She leaned against the lintel. Her knees were deliciously weak, and her eyes swam in his. She had never known a feeling like this before. She had loved William. But that had been different. This was something elemental and irresistible, a force that possessed her, a power not to be denied.

"Where did you pick it up?" John said. "In Aberdeen?"

She blinked rapidly. "Yes," she said. He was still speaking about that ridiculous rug. And he was on the verge of leaving her. . . .

"What are your plans?" she said. "I mean, your immediate plans?" And she struck him deliberately with her eyes.

"One more issue of the paper," he said. "And then, I suppose, off to Aberdeen."

"But you'll come and see me again, of course?"

"Of course."

She took his hand. It was a terrifying and beautiful moment. "As often as you can, John."

"Yes," he said. "Thirza. . . ."

Her breath cut off abruptly. "What is it, John?"

"I've sometimes thought . . . I've hoped. . . ."

"Yes, John?"

He cleared his throat. "I want you to know that I've appreciated coming here . . . your friendship . . . your kindness . . . the kindness that you . . . that you and William have always showed me. . . . I must go now, Thirza. . . . Maybe some day. . . ."

She had listened as incoherently as he had spoken.

"Oh, John. . . ."

"Good-bye, Thirza." And he was gone, limping off at a furious rate, his head high and rigid.

Thirza stood in the doorway for a long time. She examined her hand. Her finger-tips still throbbed from the touch of John's hand, and she put them tenderly to her lips. It was wonderful to be in love like this—the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to her. And to think that she might not have known for months or perhaps even for years if John had not been in trouble and had not brought his trouble to her! She stood gazing into the dusk, dreaming, seeing her dreams in pictures, her eyes dark and tender, and her lips curving repeatedly in little delighted smiles. She had never been so happy, and she thought it unlikely that anyone else had been either.

(2)

Later that evening she sent a message to Mr. Donald at his home. It read simply:

"I understand that the Kaysie Advertiser *has been sold. Please find out immediately who has bought it, and, if possible, what price was paid. I wish to have the information by to-morrow morning."*

(3)

She had the gratification of learning that her suspicions had been correct. Mr. Donald called at the White House just before midnight and informed her that Mr. Richard Carmichael was now the owner of the *Kaysie Advertiser*, but that he had been unable to discover what price he had paid for it.

The following morning cordial messages were exchanged between Mistress Skene and Mr. Carmichael, and it was arranged that they

should meet in the office of the Moray Frith Curing Company at 3 p.m. that afternoon.

Prompt to the minute Thirza's carriage, drawn by two greys in vermilion harness, swept through the Moray Frith yard and came to a halt at the door of the imposing granite-built edifice which served as the offices of the Moray Frith.

Mr. Robertson and Mr. Craig, the joint managers, were waiting to welcome her, and immediately bustled out to help her alight.

"Mr. Craig," she said. "Mr. Robertson."

"Madam."

There was an explosion of small talk.

"A beautiful day, Mistress Skene. . . ."

"Indeed yes. We were just saying as you drove up, madam. . . ."

"Wait here," Thirza said to the coachman. "I shall not be long."

"If you will be kind enough to step inside, Mistress Skene. . . ."

"A great pleasure," Mr. Robertson declared. "I have dared to hope that this visit of yours may be taken as an omen of the good-will that now exists between our firms, and of the even better. . . ."

Thirza turned her eyes full on Mr. Robertson's thin pitted face, and Mr. Robertson faltered into silence.

"I have come," she said distinctly, "to see Mr. Carmichael on a personal matter, and that is all."

"Yes yes, of course. If you will just step this way. . . ."

"Mr. Carmichael is expecting you, ma'am."

Escorted by the two talkative gentlemen, like a great ship fussed around by tugs, Thirza, decked in a new dove-grey costume and an ostrich-feathered hat, sailed up a wide, carpeted corridor past doors marked ENQUIRIES, MAIN OFFICE, LAVATORY, CASHIER, MR. CRAIG, MR. ROBERTSON, and was finally brought up at the last door but one, which was inscribed BOARD-ROOM.

She could not allow so much magnificence to pass without comment, and she said dryly, "This must all have cost a pretty penny."

Mr. Craig said, smirking, "We believe in making things comfortable."

"In my yard," she said, "we are more concerned with the quality of our herrings."

Mr. Craig swallowed, and Mr. Robertson cleared his throat and knocked on the door.

Mr. Carmichael's voice said, "Come in."

They filed in procession into a long, narrow room, and Thirza had a brief impression of a red carpet, of many pictures in heavy gilt frames, of a long walnut table—and then all her other impressions were abruptly submerged as Richard Carmichael rose from his seat at the head of the table and, without taking his eyes off her, inclined his head in greeting.

Mr. Craig said, "This is Mistress Skene, Mr. Carmichael."

"I am aware of it. Will you sit down, Mistress Skene?"

Mr. Robertson rushed to draw out a chair.

Thirza declined it. "I should prefer to sit within hailing distance," she said; and Mr. Robertson, obeying a flick of Mr. Carmichael's wrist, hurriedly replaced the original chair and drew out another, close to Mr. Carmichael's, near the top of the table.

Thirza seated herself with care. There was a momentary silence.

"You may leave us, gentlemen," Mr. Carmichael said.

Thirza, much to her irritation, became aware that she was trembling. She was separated by not more than two feet from Richard Carmichael, and she saw the intimate details of his appearance with fearful clarity—the veining of his eyes, the blunt spikes of black hair which protruded from his nostrils, the corded muscles at his throat. She reminded herself that she had no cause to be afraid of him, that it was she who was now the master, but she had lived too long with this fear to be able to overcome it by argument. She returned him a gaze which she hoped was as bold and arrogant as his own, but underneath the table her legs dickered uncertainly.

"And now, madam?"

There was no point in beating about the bush. She would show him that she could be as curt and direct as he was. "I have come to make you a proposition," she said. "It concerns the *Kaysie Advertiser*."

"Ah yes. The *Advertiser*."

"I should be interested to know your price."

"There must be some mistake, madam. The *Advertiser* is not for sale."

She had expected no other answer. She had made the opening gambit, and it had met the customary counter. She weighed up the

situation swiftly and decided to be blunt. "I should be prepared," she said, "to make a more than reasonable offer."

"Madam," Carmichael began, and she saw that he was going to repeat that the *Advertiser* was not for sale. She cut in immediately.

"For instance," she said, dangling the bait, "I would be prepared to accept the paper in part exchange for the title-deeds of Carmichael House." She was sure that this was precisely what he wanted, that it was for this exchange, and this only, that he had bought the *Advertiser,* yet he did not betray his interest by as much as the flicker of an eyelid. He sat perfectly still, watching her, his face totally devoid of expression.

"Of course," she said, "I could not accept an outright exchange. My property is considerably more valuable than yours. . . ."

"Your property, madam?"

"Carmichael House."

"Ah yes, of course."

"And therefore," she went on, "it would be necessary for you to make me some additional offer by way of compensation for the difference—the quite considerable difference—between the value of the house and the value of the newspaper." She wished the man would not sit so very still and quiet: it was most discomfiting. "However," she continued, "you can rely on it that I shan't be difficult to satisfy. I shall be content with any reasonable offer."

There was a silence during which they looked at each other, Thirza impatiently and Richard Carmichael without any expression at all.

"Well?" she demanded.

"I am afraid there is some misunderstanding, madam. As far as I know, the new directors of the *Advertiser* have no intention of selling the paper. They have suffered a great deal from its irresponsible activities in the past, and, as they have purchased it now with a view to redressing some of their past grievances, I think it very unlikely that they would be prepared to allow the paper to pass out of their hands."

"The new directors?" Thirza said. "My information was that you were the sole proprietor."

"Your information is incorrect. As a matter of fact, madam, even if you were to offer a fortune and even if I personally were to argue

your case, I very much doubt if we could persuade the directors to agree to a sale. They have ambitious plans regarding the *Advertiser.*"

She understood that perfectly. This was the language in which she herself conducted business. It contained a statement of the basis on which Richard Carmichael was prepared to continue the discussion, and it was now up to her to explore his terms further. She said flatly, "I suppose, then, that there is no point in our continuing this conversation any longer, Mr. Carmichael."

"I'm afraid not, ma'am."

Oh, he was clever! He knew how to make the most out of this temporary advantage. She looked at him with genuine respect. She was surer than ever that his whole object in purchasing the *Advertiser* had been to negotiate it in part exchange for her mortgage on Carmichael House, and yet she also knew that if at this moment she chose to rise and depart he would make no move to stop her. She said, as if on sudden impulse, "Mr. Carmichael, you said a moment ago that even if I were to offer a fortune . . . just what do you mean by a fortune?"

There was a gleam which might have been humour in Richard Carmichael's eyes. "Well, let me see. To give you an example, I think that even if you offered the title-deeds of my house plus, say, five thousand pounds, the directors would still refuse to consider your offer."

"Plus!" Thirza said. "Plus five thousand pounds! I've never heard such nonsense." And she got up, in genuine high dudgeon. "It's a fantastic figure. Preposterous. I would never think of paying it."

"Precisely, madam. I mentioned the figure in order to convince you that the newspaper is not for sale."

She was very angry. She said, deliberately, "One could start up another newspaper for a very much smaller sum of money."

"That is perfectly true." Richard Carmichael pushed back his chair and stood up slowly. "But if you will permit me to advise you, madam, I think it would be injudicious."

"And why so, sir?"

"In the first place, because it would be a waste of money. I do not think a second newspaper can succeed in a town the size of

Kaysie. And in the second place, if you were to set up the present staff of the *Advertiser* in another paper—which I presume is your intention—it would almost certainly give rise to a great deal of speculation and unpleasant talk."

"I could tolerate that."

"No doubt. But could your editor?"

She flushed with discomfiture. He had found the weak spot, had unerringly laid his finger on the one place where she was vulnerable. She realised with distaste that he must have guessed at her love for John before she had known of it herself; and it was, of course, because he had thought she would do anything for John that he had dared to ask for so preposterous a sum. She sat seething, unable to control her colour and unwilling to raise her eyes to him.

Richard Carmichael said, "Let us be frank, madam. I am under no illusions regarding your interest in the *Advertiser*. Your object is, presumably, the welfare of your friends. You wish, very naturally, to protect their interests. But you would not be doing so in starting another newspaper in Kaysie. No doubt you would try to disguise the fact that the new paper depended on your financial backing, but such facts have a habit of coming to light, and it seems clear to me that it would be an intolerable position for your friend, the editor, to have to rebut charges that you had set him up with this new toy in much the same way as a gentleman might set up his mistress in an apartment. If I am any judge of character, the young man in question would not accept such a situation. You will pardon the frankness of my speech. I am not accustomed to transacting business with . . . ah . . . ladies, and I believe in expressing myself clearly. I assure you, Mistress Skene, that you would be well advised to think twice before starting another newspaper in Kaysie. I am considering your own interests only, and I am quite sure it would be a mistake."

"I appreciate your solicitude on my behalf," Thirza said coldly. He had given her furiously to think. Every point he had made was incontestable. He had laid his cards face up on the table, and she now knew the strength of his hand. He had shown her that if she were to start a new paper she would have to do so without John MacPherson, and he had indicated that his terms for the *Advertiser* were Carmichael House and, in addition, five thousand pounds.

He was driving a hard bargain. Five thousand pounds was not the astronomical sum it had once been to her, nevertheless, it was a great deal of money. It was infinitely more than the *Advertiser* was worth, and if she were to pay it it would represent not only a bad piece of business but a major defeat. She would be well and truly bested. And he wanted—insisted on—Carmichael House as well. Her hackles rose at his presumption. She wouldn't, couldn't, give him the satisfaction of so great a triumph. No, not even for John. . . .

She remembered John's face. She saw him sitting opposite her in the sun-room telling her. . . .

At least, she couldn't give in to Carmichael, yet. And certainly not ever to his face. Later, she might write or send Donald. . . .

Five thousand pounds! It truly was a fortune. Could she ever bring herself? . . . She didn't know. . . . She would have to think it over . . . examine the problem afresh . . . see if there was not some other approach . . . some pressure which in her haste she had neglected. . . .

"Your price, of course," she said, "is an insult to my intelligence. I shall not consider paying it."

"Price?" Richard Carmichael said. "Do please understand, Mistress Skene, once for all, that the *Advertiser* is not for sale."

She inclined her head in an affectation of submission. "In that case," she said, "you might be kind enough to conduct me to my carriage."

CHAPTER VIII

(1)

ON HER RETURN FROM HER visit to Richard Carmichael she went straight to her room and changed her clothes, dressing with unusual care and ostentation. It wasn't likely that John would come until evening, but there was no harm in being prepared. She was painfully excited at the prospect of seeing him again, and could think meantime of nothing else.

She walked through the house, had a few words with Manson, and a few more with Nellie, encountered the Dominie on the stairs, and bewildered him by asking coquettishly if he liked her dress. She returned to her room and, for lack of anything better to do, brushed her hair until her arm ached. She went downstairs again, glanced at the litter of papers on her desk, and impatiently pushed them into a pigeon-hole. She sent for Mr. Donald and chatted to him so sociably and so inconsequentially, flitting about the room, touching this and that as she spoke, that he too became restless and excited and snapped unmercifully at the clerks when he returned to the main office. She stood for a long time at the window of the sun-room looking vaguely across the Bay, barely noticing that a brig was unloading at the harbour and observing the figures of men, like matchsticks, in the rigging of the *Foolish Virgin* without troubling to put the telescope on them.

Engrossed in her dreams of John, she could not bear the thought of sitting through a meal with Andra and the Dominie, and she ordered her dinner to be brought to her room. When Nellie knocked before bringing in the tray, she got up from her dressing-table with a great surge of expectancy, and later, when she heard the younger maid's feet in the corridor, he heart hammered furiously and she raced to the door.

"What is it, Jessie?"

Jessie stared at her.

"Only your warming-pan, ma'am."

She watched the clock, praying with diminishing hope that John would come, angry with herself for not having definitely invited him. How long was it since she had seen him last? Nearly twenty-four hours . . . a lifetime.

She tormented herself deliberately with the fear that he had already left Kaysie, that he had gone without coming to say good-bye. And, having once given way to her imagination, she gave it full play. She lit the candles, lay fully clothed on the bed, and abandoned herself voluptuously to dreams.

She listened breathlessly to John's declaration of love, and, her starry eyes on the bed tester, whispered that she loved him too.

She even conjured up a few kisses and returned them with ardour. . . . She replanned the house to allow for a master. It might be wise to move the bedroom, to occupy with John a room which held no memories to disturb them. If they moved into the west guest-room, John could have the little adjoining bedroom as a dressing-room. And then, of course, there would be children. . . .

She looked at the clock. Ten-past ten. He would not come now, but to-morrow she would make sure of him. She would send a message in the morning inviting him to dinner.

They would dine alone in the sun-room. If it was a good evening she would have the french windows open and a table set out on the verandah.

Dinner itself would be only the preliminary. Afterwards, John was bound to speak. She remembered reading somewhere that any woman worth her salt could always, given favourable circumstances, squeeze a proposal out of a man who loved her. She smiled broadly, in delightful anticipation. She had no doubt that she was worth her salt, and she would certainly see to it that the circumstances were favourable! . . .

She glanced at the door. Could it be imagination or was the handle turning? She heard a faint click, and sat bolt upright. Undoubtedly there was someone there.

"Andra?" she said.

"No," a deep voice said quietly. "It's me. Open up."

She drew in her breath sharply and leapt from the bed. She was surprised only for a split second. The ship was in the Bay, of course.

And she had known that he would soon be calling on her, but, in the excitement of being in love, had forgotten all about him. She unlocked and opened the door, and Captain Stullen stepped inside.

Thirza said sharply. "Did anyone see you?"

He shook his head.

She glanced quickly along the corridor, closed and carefully locked the door. "How did you get in?"

"The room below," he said. "The verandah."

"But why? It's always been my window before."

He shrugged his shoulders.

She looked searchingly at him. Although it was a chilly evening he had neither coat nor cap. He was wearing only a white silk shirt and his usual immaculate white trousers of a foreign cut, worn low on the hip-bone, and fastening with buttons at the sides. She noted that his face, usually so brown, showed signs of pallor, and that his eyes were bloodshot. "Now that you're here, sit down then," she said.

He limped across the room, dragging his right leg.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing. Anchor cable dropped on my foot."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"I'm my own doctor."

"You don't look well," she said brutally. "You should see a doctor. Is the foot crushed? I expect you've broken a bone."

"I expect so, ma'am," he said mildly.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. It always irritated her when he sat on the bed, but by now she knew better than to protest. She seated herself primly on a cane-bottomed chair out of his reach, and between the bed and the door.

"I suppose you've been fighting," she said. "And got wounded. And that's why you don't want to see a doctor."

"You have a melodramatic mind, ma'am. A couple of darn fools dropped half a dozen links of cable on my foot this mornin', an' that's all there is to it. I got a good cargo for you this time. Your men all ready?"

"I expect so," she said. "It all goes on independently of me nowadays. It's routine. Have you had the signal?"

He grinned. "The old lady's laundry is flyin' on the braehead now."

"Well," she said, "they'll be ready. What have you got?"

"Much the usual. Only more rum."

"Jamaican?"

"Nothing but."

She nodded, pleased. "And the millineries?"

"Silks mostly. Including a few bales of new stuff that's all the fashion in Paris. I reckoned you'd better look it over before I settled for a load. I got some perfumes too."

"Lace?"

"A little."

"Well now," she said, "we've still got to settle for the last lot, but I wasn't expecting you. I've been busy. I simply haven't made any arrangements." She looked helplessly at the bureau where, normally, whenever the *Foolish Virgin* was sighted in the Bay, she stored the sum of money she owed him. "I haven't even collected the money yet, and Mr. Donald has the keys of the office safe. It's all very vexing. . . ."

"There's no hurry," Stullen said, amused. "I don't worry about the money, ma'am."

"No," she said, "of course not. But I wanted—particularly wanted—to settle now. And I should also have liked to have settled for the new consignment. When are you landing it?"

"To-morrow, if the coast's still clear."

"It will be, I expect," she said absently. "The Coastguard cutter was here only a few days ago, and there's usually an interval of two or three weeks between its visits." She was irritated. She would have liked to have had the money all ready for him, not only the price of the last consignment, but also a sum sufficient to cover the price of the new cargo. If only she had had the money ready she could have made this the last meeting between them. Now, of course, she would have to see him once again. It was really very disappointing. . . . She said, "Can you let me have the invoices for the new stuff to-morrow? . . . No, not to-morrow." To-morrow was to be a special day, and to-morrow evening, in particular, must be exclusively John's. "The day after to-morrow?"

"I could, I suppose," Stullen said. "But why all the haste, ma'am? I reckon on being here at least a month."

"I shall not be receiving you during that time," she said.

Stullen pursed his lips and regarded her with tolerant amusement.

"I have come to the conclusion," she said, "that our association must cease entirely."

"You have come to that conclusion before, ma'am."

"But this time I mean it."

"You mean," he said, and she saw that he still was not taking her seriously, "that you don't want the stuff any more?"

"Not after this present cargo. I'll take this. But this is the last one."

Stullen considered this. "Had a scare?" he asked at last.

"No," she said, "I have not had a scare, and I am not in the least scared, Captain Stullen. I have simply decided that the risks are out of proportion to the profits, and that our association has more than served its purpose."

"Well, ma'am, we'll jest have to step up the profits. There are several good lines that you haven't touched so far. Now, take jewels, for example. Last time I was in Antwerp. . . ."

"You don't understand," Thirza said. "Maybe I didn't express myself properly. I don't care what the profits are. I've had enough of it. I'm washing my hands of the whole business. I'm not interested in jewels or in any other of your good lines. I intend to pay you all I owe you, not to-morrow, but the next day—that is, Friday—and that is to be the final settlement between us and our last meeting."

"So," Stullen said, considering this. "And how about me, ma'am? Supposing I don't like it this way?"

"You have no choice in the matter. There is nothing you can do about it."

"Except . . . ruin you, mebbe?"

"By exposing our transactions? You wouldn't do that."

"No, I don't suppose I would. You really set on this, ma'am?"

"Absolutely," she said.

Their eyes met, and she knew he knew that she meant it.

"In that case," he said, "suppose you take the stone outa your

mouth an' tell me about it. You say you're not scared, an' I reckon I believe that, ma'am. I know you don't scare easy. But I also reckon you're jest as greedy as you were last year an' always will be, an' I guess there's some good reason when you turn your back on easy money. Let's have the reason, ma'am."

"I don't like your tone," Thirza said, nettled, "and I don't like your insinuations either. No one has ever suggested before that I was greedy, and . . ."

"There are a lot o' home truths I could tell you, ma'am, that you've never heard before. Now suppose we cut the cackle an' come to the point. Has there been talk in the town?"

"About our business association? No."

"You sure?"

"Quite sure. At least, I've heard nothing. And I don't see how there could be a leakage. My people are all trustworthy."

"How about the old dame who shows the signal? The one who puts the washing up on the braehead?"

"She'd never talk," Thirza said. "Her son's one of my crabbers. One of the men who bring the *crop* in. I can depend on them entirely."

"And the other crabbers?"

"They're all safe. They're all . . . beholden to me."

"You mean," Stullen said, interested, "that you've got something on them all?"

"If you like to put it that way . . . yes, I suppose one could put it that way. But that's not how I work. These men are all faithful employees, and, in addition, extremely well paid. I trust them completely."

"How about your staff?"

"In the house, you mean? They don't know anything about it."

"Not even the housekeeper?"

"Not even Manson. And if she did . . . well, this whole conversation is absurd. There hasn't been any leakage, I tell you, and it's not because I'm afraid of our business deals becoming known that I've decided to end them."

"What is it because of, then?"

She sighed. "You can be very obtuse, Captain Stullen. Surely there doesn't need to be any particular reason. I just don't want to

go on with this hole-in-the-corner affair any longer, and that must suffice you."

He lay back on the bed and slowly raised his bad leg until it was resting on the bedspread. He closed his eyes and relaxed visibly. "I think there needs to be a reason," he said after a little. "As you know, ma'am, I'm a student o' human nature in a very small way. I like to know what goes on inside people's heads. I've always been mighty interested in that little head o' yours, an' I reckon I have a pretty fair idea o' what goes on inside it. You've got a business-man's mind. Now a business-man doesn't throw away money without a reason." He opened his eyes and looked at her shrewdly. "What's the reason, ma'am?"

"I tell you . . ."

"What about the Donalds?" he interrupted. "That manager fellow—he's smart, mebbe too smart. And there's his brother in that inn o' yours. You been havin' trouble with the Donalds, ma'am?"

"Certainly not. I haven't been having trouble with anybody. I merely wish our association to cease because I'm tired of it."

"Nobody gets tired o' makin' money, ma'am. If you'd jest tell me what's botherin' you I reckon mebbe I could settle it for you. I been settlin' trouble o' one kind or another most o' my days."

"There is no trouble," she said, exasperated by his pertinacity. "And I really think this conversation has gone on long enough. My mind is quite made up. The cargo which you are to jettison to-morrow is the last I shall take from you, and, as we agreed earlier, I should like to make a full settlement of all outstanding money the day after to-morrow." She gave him a sharp, hard look. He was lying at full stretch, his head back on the pillow, his eyes closed, his breathing deep and regular. "Are you listening to me?" she demanded. Surely he couldn't have gone to sleep. . . . "Captain Stullen!"

"I'm listenin'," he said, eyes still closed. "You got any spirits by you?"

"Spirits?" she said.

"Rum."

She looked at him out of widening eyes. "Are you in pain?"

"Discomfort would be a better word, ma'am. But never mind that now."

"You ought to see a doctor," she said. "A thing like a crushed bone can be very serious. For all you know, you may have a hæmorrhage. . . ."

"I asked: have you any rum, ma'am?"

"Not here," she said.

"I didn't think you'd have it here," he said. "Go and get some."

She moistened her lips, wavered on the edge of telling him that she was not a member of his crew to be ordered about at his whim, and then, alarmed at his immobility and his pallor, she checked her answer, and, with a last anxious glance at him, crossed quickly to the door.

She unlocked it quietly and peered out into the corridor. There was nobody about.

"I won't be long," she whispered.

He did not reply.

She was at the foot of the stairs on her way to the wine-cellar when she remembered that it was always kept locked nowadays and that Manson had the keys. She retraced her steps slowly. She was very reluctant to broach Manson for the keys. What excuse could she make that would explain away a bottle of rum at this time of night? How vexing this all was. . . .

She had to pass the Dominie's room, and, on a sudden impulse, she stopped and knocked gently on his door.

"Who is it?" the Dominie's voice enquired.

"Me."

There were peculiar sounds from within—a hurried closing of drawers, a rustling of papers, the click of a key turning in a lock, and an odd dull thud that defied a guess.

"Do hurry," she grumbled.

"Coming. Just coming," the Dominie said.

He unlocked the door and opened it only a few inches. He inserted his face in the opening. "I thought it might be Andra," he said. "He's been twice at the door already. . . ."

"Dominie," she said, "have you any spirits here?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, don't be ridiculous. You heard perfectly well. Please. This is important, Dominie. Have you any rum that you could let me have?"

"Certainly not," the Dominie said, and thoughts flickered like gnats in the back of his eyes. "I don't ever have rum in my room."

"Brandy then? Or whisky?"

"No, no," he said immediately. "No alcoholic spirits of any kind. No wines. No beers or ales. Nothing."

"Dominie, please. This is urgent. I'm not trying to catch you out. I want you to help me. Will you please let me have a little rum or brandy if you have it?"

"But I don't have it, Thirza. I'm not allowed to have it. You know perfectly well that I'm not ever allowed to have it."

"Never mind whether you're allowed or not. Just let me have some."

"But I truly don't have any, Thirza."

She sighed hard and proceeded along the corridor, and the Dominie's voice, still emerging from the partially open door, followed her with the earnest assurance that not only did he not possess any spirits, but that, in fact, he had ceased to consume spiritous liquors. . . .

A streak of light showed in the corridor at the door of Manson's private sitting-room. Thirza knocked and went in.

Manson was seated by the fire with a ledger in her lap and a pencil in her hand. "Hullo." She looked at Thirza over the rims of her spectacles. "Good gracious, lassie, you've been changin' your frock again. . . ."

"Never mind that now," Thirza said. "Can I have the keys of the wine-cellar, please?"

Manson laid down her ledger and subjected her mistress to a searching scrutiny.

"I have toothache," Thirza said.

"The keys are behind the door," Manson said. "No, on the lower peg there." She put her hands on the arms of her chair and hoisted herself laboriously to her feet. "You get alang to your bed, an' I'll fetch you a toddy. . . ."

"No, no," Thirza said. "I'll get it myself. I want to have something to do. You don't mind if I take these candles? It's the big key, isn't it?"

"Ay. Is it bad?"

"Is what bad?"

"The toothache?"

"Oh," Thirza said. "Yes. It's aching pretty hard."

"You should get it oot," Manson said. "I've telt you afore. There's nae sense in hoardin' your teeth like siller. I nivver had ony peace masel' until I had ma molars out. . . ."

"I'll bring back the key," Thirza said.

"Na na, nivver mind. I'll be ben to say good nicht an' see that you're a'richt, an' I'll collect the key then."

"No," Thirza said. "We can say good night now. I want to get off to sleep. I'll keep the key till the morning. Good night, Manson." And before Manson could say another word, Thirza had slipped out into the corridor and closed the door.

She collected a bottle of rum, a glass, and a corkscrew, and returned to her room.

Captain Stullen lay just as she had left him, but as she came in he raised an eyebrow and regarded her out of one eye.

"How much?" she asked, forcing the corkscrew into the neck of the bottle.

"Here, give it to me." He sat upright, deftly uncorked the bottle, and poured himself three fingers. "None to you?"

"Of course not."

"Well, here's to the next cargo!" he said, and drained the glass at a gulp. He extracted the cork from the bottle with his teeth and poured another smaller measure into the glass. He stretched down and set the bottle on its base under the bed, then he sniffed critically at the rum in his glass and took a small sip.

"Feeling better?" Thirza enquired.

"I feel fine," Stullen said. "Your melodramatic mind is puttin' words in your mouth again, ma'am. I felt fine when I came, an' I feel fine now. An' now to business. Am I to gather that you are serious when you tell me that you don't want any more stuff from me?"

"I've never been more serious."

"An' you won't tell me why?"

She made an impatient gesture and walked to the window. She opened the shutter, looked for a moment into the darkness, and closed it again. "I've told you all there is to tell."

Stullen sipped his rum and eyed her thoughtfully. "Well, I

reckon you don't give me any choice but to accept your decision, ma'am."

She gave him a quick and grateful smile.

"Only, of course, I don't aim to stop visitin' you."

Her smile froze, then vanished. "You'll have no cause to visit me in the future."

"Well, now, that's a matter of opinion. Personally, I reckon I'll have as much cause as ever I had. Y'see, ma'am, I never regarded my visits primarily as business visits. The business, you might say, was more in the nature of a justification than anything else."

"Precisely," she said. "Well, now you will have no justification."

"I don't need any justification, ma'am."

She controlled her growing impatience. "Really," she said, "this is all getting very confused. When I told you that I had decided to end our association I meant, of course, our association in every shape and form. I am simply not prepared to do business with you any longer, and still less am I prepared to receive you in this clandestine fashion in the middle of the night. You don't imagine, do you, that having ceased to make any profit out of our meetings I could possibly permit them to continue!"

"I don't imagine anything," Stullen said. He hoisted his leg off the bed and allowed it to descend slowly to the floor. "Let's strip the silk off our tongues, ma'am, an' have some plain talk. Could it be that you are lookin' for a formula?"

"I don't understand."

"Let me talk. Some formula that allows you to reconcile yourself to my visits. I'm talkin' to you now as though you were as intelligent as I think you are, ma'am, an' I'll thank you not to be coy an' play the woman at me. I've never done much talkin' to you before, because it hasn't seemed to be necessary, an' you an' I have a habit, when we talk, o' flickin' each other on the raw. But now there are some things that have got to be said, both ways, an' I'll have my say first. In the first place, I know you're a very proud woman. . . ."

She tried to get a word in, but he forestalled her. "No," he said. "Don't argue for the sake o' arguin'. God knows we can find plenty o' genuine arguments without makin' a game of it. You're a proud woman, an' you know it, an' *that is so*. You've told me, near every

time I've been here, that I must not come again. You've fixed steel shutters on your window, an' you've rigged bells all over the room. You've done this because o' your pride an' your sense o' propriety. You have a very strongly developed sense o' propriety"—his eyes gleamed for a moment—"an' I respect you for it, ma'am. You've had difficulty all along in reconcilin' your own particular code of morals with my visits, an' one of the conditions you have imposed upon yourself—an' you've kept it faithfully, ma'am—is that our relationship should be established, and re-established each time, against your will. I've had to be mighty clever at times to take you, ma'am, an' I reckon you've got nothing to reproach yourself with on that account. You can say fairly enough that whatever was done to you was done against your inclination an' your will."

"Captain Stullen!"

"So far so good. You don't need to turn your head away an' blush, ma'am. There's more to come, an' you're going to get it straight. Now you're no plaster saint, ma'am. You got all the instincts an' tricks o' your sex, an' some more besides, I sometimes think. There's no use in your pretendin' to me that you haven't liked my comin' an' all it's meant. You haven't mebbe liked it jest as much as I have, but you've liked it, although I reckon you've never got around to admittin' it to yourself an' probably never will. That's one of the things I like about you, ma'am. When it suits your book you can look a fact in the face an' see only its backside. Steady now, I don't aim to rile you. I give you that. I oughtn't to have said it. But to get back. You're a respectable woman with a strong sense o' pride and propriety, and there have been times—an' I think this is one o' them right now—when your pride's been hard pressed. But at the same time, ma'am, you're a business-man, always have been, always will be, as sharp on a deal as any I ever came across, an' when your pride's been hardest pressed you've slanted your mind to the thought o' the business you an' I have done together, an' you've balanced the benefits of our business association agin the injuries to your pride from the other side o' our association, an' I reckon, ma'am, that you've generally come to the conclusion that the profit has more than made up for the loss."

He sipped at his rum, and she had the opportunity to speak, but couldn't. She couldn't raise her face to him. She knew without

looking that he was watching her intently, his eyes fixed on her above the rim of his glass, and she just stood, half-turned away from him, her face crimson and her eyes down, waiting for him to continue.

"That's how it's been. Least, that's how it's seemed to me, ma'am. You've been mighty sorry for yourself, but you've reckoned that the business end made up for your private sufferings, an' you've been prepared on these terms to go on suffering indefinitely. That was in the past. Now, something has happened to change all this. Something you haven't told me yet. Now, you've got to stop doing business with me, or so you say, an' that means, of course, that the old formula isn't of use any more. If you're not doin' business with me you can't balance the advantages of our business against the impropriety of the other thing. That's why I want you to tell me the real reason for your decision not to take any more stuff from me, because if I knew that, ma'am, I reckon mebbe I could help you to find a new formula."

His gentleness was frighteningly disarming. At first when he had begun to speak she had only been angry, but as he continued she perceived that for once he was talking to her in the way she had always wanted him to talk—sincerely and honestly, and she had listened in growing confusion but avidly to all he had had to say. It was humiliating to be analysed with so much perception. It was like having one's clothes torn off in public. And once it was all over one could not just draw a cloak over one's nakedness and proceed as if nothing had happened. . . .

"Now listen," Stullen said, "I knew you'd be shocked, but not all this shocked." He had never spoken to her in a gentle voice before, and she wished he wouldn't. She felt utterly defenceless, and she was getting all mixed up about everything. She wouldn't, couldn't, agree with the devastating things he had said about her, and yet she could not deny that there was truth in them. If he didn't stop soon she would weep. And if she wept she wouldn't even know why she was weeping. She slipped a hand between her breasts and pressed fiercely to still them. "You've got to face these facts," Stullen was saying, "however much you dislike them, because unless you do, and unless you are ready to speak to me frankly on the basis of these facts, I guess I just won't be able to

believe what you say. You tell me you don't want to see me again. Fine. There's a simple statement of fact. But it's a statement of fact you've made every time I've been here. Why should I believe it now?"

"Because it's true," she whispered.

"But it's been true every time," he said. "Hasn't it?"

He was forcing her into an impossible position. She said yes, but there wasn't any sound.

"Hasn't it?" he repeated.

"Yes," she said. "But not true the way it is now. I don't want to see you again. I won't see you." She made a stupid little bluster. "If you come again I'll give instructions to my men to shoot you."

"The first time I came," he said, "you told me precisely the same thing. You also said you'd turn the dogs loose every night, but every night I've been here the dogs have been chained up down at the kennels, and so far I don't seem to have been shot at at all. I guess mebbe you've got a headache or some kind of gripes, an' this is all jest an extension of the formula, an' in fact, ma'am, for all your fine statements, you don't want to stop me comin' here, neither for business nor the other thing. Ma'am, I'm tired to-night. I don't want to play games. I've been reckonin' you and I might come to a gentler understandin'. I think mebbe there are things I should say to you that might better have been said before. I'm fond o' you, ma'am. I've got kind of accustomed to comin' here to see you, an' it's got so that it means something to me." He stretched out a hand. "Come on over here an' speak to me."

"Captain Stullen," she said piteously, "I wish I could make you believe. . . . I grant what you've said . . . the criticisms of me. . . . I haven't ever been absolutely honest with you or with myself. . . . Your coming here . . . I admit I never really minded . . . perhaps I even enjoyed it, I don't know. . . ."

"Come on over here," he said softly.

"But you must believe me now . . . I must convince you. . . ." She looked him straight in the face for the first time in many minutes. "Captain Stullen, I think I owe you the truth." She bit the words back and then forced them out in a rush. "The truth is . . . I am . . . I have become very interested in another man."

He sat quite still, looking at her and obviously thinking.

"Very interested?" he enquired.

"Very interested," she said, repeating the ridiculous words.

"You mean, in popular parlance, ma'am, that you've fallen in love?"

"Yes," she said, "that's what I mean."

He considered this, and he considered her. She could not stand and suffer his probing eyes on her face, and she flung away and walked again to the window.

"So you see," she said, pointing her words at the shutter, "that it's impossible for me ever to see you again."

He said, "The editor?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

He shrugged his shoulders, leaned down, and picked up the rum bottle. He examined the label. He said, "You tellin' me the truth this time, ma'am?"

"Can't you see I am?"

He uncorked the bottle and carefully poured a little into the glass. "Pity you couldn't have told me this at the beginning," he said. "Saved us both a bit of breath. Your health, ma'am."

"I should have told you," she said. "I'm sorry. I know I should have told you, but I haven't—hadn't—told anybody yet, and it seemed more difficult than it was to . . . well, just to say it. But now, at least, you do understand, don't you, that our business dealings must cease and that I can't see you again?"

He drained his glass, laid it down, and sat looking at his hands, these large and powerful hands that she had got to know so well. "You goin' to marry him?" he said at last.

"I don't know."

"How so?"

"He hasn't asked me yet."

He stared at her. "And suppose he doesn't ask you?"

"It doesn't make any difference to what I've said. I still wouldn't —couldn't have you coming here. Don't you see . . . everything's different now?"

"I suppose so," he said. "I suppose that's the way you would look at it." He got to his feet, his face tightening as he put weight on his injured leg.

She said, "Captain Stullen, seriously, I wish you'd see a doctor about that foot. Or at the very least let me look at it."

"And what do you think you could do, ma'am, in the doctoring line that I couldn't do better myself? The hell with your solicitude. My leg's all right."

"Just the same," she said, aware of the new intimacy between them and frankly delighting in it, "you mustn't climb down to-night. I don't know how you managed to reach even the sun-room balcony. If you wait a minute I'll see if the coast's clear. Wait there. I'll be back in a minute."

She returned for him almost immediately and led him down-stairs, both wincing, he with pain and she at the creaking of the steps. She took him to the back door.

"And you'll come the day after to-morrow for the final settlement of our accounts?"

"Yes," he said. "But here's something to think about. It won't be the money I'll come for. It's never been the money."

She said softly, "I know that, Captain Stullen. Now look, when you come, come about one a.m. Don't try to climb. I'll be waiting here at the back door for you. And do be careful of that leg."

"The leg's all right, ma'am." He caught her unexpectedly by the bosom of her frock and jerked her to him, almost raising her off her feet. He kissed her then, brutally and hard. Thirza submitted freely, and when his grip relaxed she slid her arms round his neck, pressing close to him all along the length of their bodies, and herself kissed him on the lips.

"Good-bye," she said. "And God bless you."

And then she fled.

CHAPTER IX

(1)

HER FIRST THOUGHT WHEN SHE woke next day was that she was dining with John, and for the whole of the morning her life revolved around that thought. At an indecently early hour she sent the office boy to John's lodgings with the invitation and waited on tenterhooks for the reply.

It was adequate, but not very satisfying. John wrote merely, "I'll be there," and signed himself with his initials.

She trifled with her correspondence, her thoughts far away with John, and occasionally sliding to Stullen and to their meeting of last night. She had never liked him so well. She confessed to herself that she would miss his visits. She would miss the excitement of sighting the *Foolish Virgin* in the Bay, the tension of the long wait while her crabbers brought the *crop* ashore, the satisfaction, finally, of a good and daring job well done. But most of all she would miss Stullen himself. It was a startling thought, but she did not allow herself to probe beneath its surface. She had other much more important and more pressing things to think of. . . .

What should she wear, for instance? Would her new mauve velvet dress with the Batiste collar be a little too formal? It suited her, certainly, and she would like John to see her in it, but perhaps it was too sophisticated for him, it carried a suggestion of the *grande dame,* and it just might tie his tongue up at a time when it was important that he shouldn't feel in the least overawed or shy. No, she would wear something homely and girlish—one of those informal tartan dresses that the Queen had made so popular. She would wear the one with all the lace on it, and she would do her hair in a chignon, and leave off all jewellery except the big carved lava brooch that Captain Stullen had brought her from Italy. . . . She shook her head at her tactlessness. Nothing of Stullen's. One of her own simple pinchbeck brooches would be just as appropriate

to the dress and very much more suitable to the circumstances.

She wondered how Cook was getting on with her preparations, and meandered down to the basement several times to find out. She just couldn't settle to work, and made no attempt to. Mr. Donald tried to interest her in a letter from Andersons, the Aberdeen wholesalers, who were asking for a reduction in the price of her smoked herrings, but the letter was so long and wordy that she couldn't grasp the argument at a glance, and, to his great astonishment, instructed Mr. Donald to deal with it himself.

"But there's a lot of money involved," Mr. Donald said. "This is a matter of policy, ma'am. If we agree to give Andersons this reduction, we'll have to give it to the other wholesalers too."

"You are perfectly capable of deciding on a matter of policy," she said. She tapped the letter. "You've been in personal touch with these people. Just use your own judgment and decide the issue on its merits."

Mr. Donald shook his head in bewilderment.

"And don't trouble me with any more details this morning," she said.

In one of her descents into the basement she met Andra on the stairs, and, having missed him at the breakfast table, wished him good morning and would have asked him if he was well, but Andra turned his head away and swept scornfully past.

She smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "This must be one of the days when I am an uncommonly great Pharisee," she said.

Later, she asked Manson what was wrong with Andra.

"Wrang! Fit's nae wrang wi' him, you mean?"

"But seriously. Has he been sick? He wasn't at breakfast this morning, and he appears to be having one of his moods. He's not speaking."

"You're lucky," Manson said. "He's speakin' to me. As for fit's wrang wi' him, the Lord alane kens. He was oot this mornin'. Jessie tells me he was oot in the middle o' the nicht an' a'. But he demanded his breakfast when he came in, although the table was cleared, an' I can tell you there's naething wrang wi' his stommick. He ate like a horse, as usual. Is your tooth better?"

"Oh yes," Thirza said quickly. "Yes, thank you. Quite better. By the way, Manson, I'm having Mr. MacPherson for dinner." It

should have been easy to say that they would dine *tête-à-tête* in the sun-room or on the balcony. but it wasn't. Manson's shrewd and steady eyes disarmed her. She said, "A business matter," and left it at that. She would by-pass Manson altogether and tell Jessie to set the table on the balcony. She would tell the housekeeper all about everything afterwards . . . after John had proposed to her, when there really was something to tell . . . but just at the moment she was too vulnerable to be the target of Manson's dry wit.

The morning ticked away, second by second. It was one of the slowest mornings she could remember, but although time dragged it did not drag unpleasantly. She had so many plans to make and so many dreams to dream.

And then, just as the gong sounded for lunch, Mr. Donald came in without knocking to say that the Coastguard cutter had been sighted in the Bay.

She glanced at the window, immediately alert.

"Do the others know about it?"

"I sent a message to Willie Wood," Mr. Donald said. Willie Wood was the head crabber. "And he's gone up the braehead to tell Maggie Ann to get her washing down."

Thirza nodded. "Everything is under control then." She went to the telescope and trained it across the Bay until she picked up the distinctive sails of the cutter. "Coastguard all right," she said. She turned the telescope on the *Foolish Virgin*. There was no sign of life on deck, but she had no doubt whatsoever that Captain Stullen was keeping a good look-out, and that he would already have been informed of the Coastguards' arrival. She said, "I wonder why it's here? . . . Annoying. . . . One more day and the *crop* would have been sunk."

"A routine visit, I expect," Mr. Donald said.

They looked at each other calmly.

"I expect so," she said. "It probably won't be necessary to put any of the emergency plans into operation, but it's as well to be prepared. Are they standing by with the rockets?"

"They will be, ma'am. Willie Wood will have seen to that. Do you want a signal made to the ship?"

"No, no. There's no need. Captain Stullen must have sighted the cutter an hour ago. He will have taken all the necessary steps."

"He doesn't seem to be getting under way, ma'am."

"No," she admitted. She looked at the *Foolish Virgin* again. There was no one in the rigging and no one at work on the anchor cable. "Either he has sunk the *crop* at anchor or else he has some plan or other up his sleeve. In any case, we can safely leave the Captain to attend to his own side of the business, Mr. Donald. I don't think there's anything for us to do, although you'd better send one of the crabbers down to the harbour to see if anyone down there knows anything, and of course you'll have a watch kept on the cutter and let me know if anything untoward develops."

"I think the washing's coming down now, ma'am," Mr. Donald said.

She looked over at the braehead. On the highest point above the Fishertown and visible many miles out to sea Maggie Ann's notorious line of washing still flapped in the breeze, but two figures, presumably Maggie Ann and her half-witted son, were now at work on it and the line was slowly shortening, garment by garment.

Thirza was not unduly concerned. There had been several incidents with the Coastguard cutter, notably a very disturbing one late at night when Stullen had had to jettison his rum as he lay at anchor, with the Coastguard cutter approaching fast and not more than two or three cables off. She had thought that it was all up with them then, for the Coastguards had gone on board with a search warrant, and she had known that the ship was full of wines, tobaccos, and silks.

But the stuff had been so well concealed that the search had failed to discover a single dutiable article, and on its conclusion Captain Stullen had mildly pointed out to the lieutenant in charge, and had equally mildly repeated to her, that although he had no objection to his ship being searched, he would have been within his rights in refusing to permit it, and that, had he had a dutiable cargo, he would simply have kept it. According to his fix of the ship's position—and he was of the opinion that he did not make mistakes in such matters—the *Foolish Virgin* was a full cable outside territorial waters. . . .

Oh yes, she had complete confidence in Captain Stullen. The story of his besting of the Coastguards had leaked out in the town

and had been greatly relished. The Coastguards weren't likely to risk making laughing-stocks of themselves again. . . .

Jessie met her in the hall. "Begging your pardon, ma'am. . . ."

"It's all right, Jessie," she said. "I know I'm late, but I'm just going in for lunch now."

"It's not that, ma'am. It's the Meenister."

"The Minister? Mr. Simpson, you mean?"

"Yes, ma'am. He's in the front parlour. He says it's verra important."

She could not understand what the Minister could want of her at this hour, but whatever it was she intended to give him short shrift. What with the Coastguards in the Bay and her preoccupation with her own personal affairs she was in no mood for any kind of ecclesiastical business. She left the door open behind her as a hint, and said briskly, "Well, Mr. Simpson?"

Whisky Johnny was standing at the window, his back to her. He said, "Close the door, and come over here, Thirza."

She obeyed in an astonished silence.

"Now," he said, "can onybody hear us?"

"I don't think so," she said, still startled. "I mean, no. Nobody can hear us."

"Right," the Minister said, and, looking at him, she saw that this must be a matter of the utmost gravity. His mouth was puckered tight and drawn down at the corners, and his eyes were crinkled with uneasiness. "Noo listen, I dinna ken foo much o' this is true, an' I dinna want to ken. I happen to be in receipt o' some important information, an' although it may be, an' in fact is, unethical o' me to dee so, I am passin' it on to you for fit it's worth. Dinna interrupt me till I feenish. But first, sit doon."

She sat down stiff-backed in the chair by the window and took a firm grip of its arms.

"First o' a'," the Minister said. "Dirk Stullen has been arrested."

"That's ridiculous," she said.

"Thirza! Please. . . ."

"Captain Stullen's out there in the Bay aboard his ship."

"Dinna interrupt me again, lassie. Stullen was arrested this mornin' in the *Black Bull,* where he'd spent the nicht. . . ."

"But," she said. "But . . ." and lapsed into silence. It *was* pos-

sible, of course. Only it was very unlikely. When Stullen came to see her he beached his boat in the creek just below the White House, and after he left her he always made a point of rowing straight back to his ship. Several times she had challenged the advisability of his coming ashore, and he had assured her he would never risk being found in the town until after he had sunk the *crop*. It would be an unjustifiable risk, he had said, and one he would never take. Why then should he have taken it last night? He had not been himself, of course. That leg had been troubling him. And she had troubled him, too. Perhaps more than she had guessed. . . .

"Stullen was arrested this mornin'," the Minister continued, his harsh, flat voice ringing with conviction, "an' clapped into the jail, an' that's far he is noo. The Coastguard was sent for last nicht, in the middle o' the nicht, afore Stullen was apprehended, an' naebody kens fit w'y they werena here oors ago."

"They're here now," Thirza said.

"I ken. An' in due course they'll board Stullen's ship, wi' a warrant a' in order, an' they'll strip her plank b' plank if need be. They're also plannin' to dredge a' roun' her. . . ."

"This is all very interesting," Thirza began. "But I hardly see. . . ."

"Haud your tongue, lassie. It's ower late to speechify an' be grand. Stullen has been interviewed a' mornin'. They've a special lawyer oot f'ae Aiberdeen. An' he's been speirin' an' speirin' at Stullen, tryin' to get him to incriminate you."

"Ah . . . h," she said in a long whisper. "And Stullen?"

"Says he nivver sa' you. Nivver heard o' you. Disna ken fit they're speakin' aboot."

"In that case," she said, hope soaring anew. "In that case . . ."

"No," he said. "It's nae use, Thirza. They ken."

"But why haven't they come here, then? Why haven't they arrested me?"

"Mebbe because they're feart . . . meantime. You're a powerful woman nooadays, Thirza. They canna afford to mak' mistakes o' that kind, an' like as nae they're waitin' for mair proof. Or mebbe it's because they think there's nae hurry. There *is* nae hurry, y'see."

"No hurry," she repeated dully. "No hurry." Her head was expanding and contracting in fearsome fashion, and she put her hands to it and rocked it as though it did not belong to her. "How do they know?" she said suddenly. "I mean, why do they suspect? Why me?"

"Your brother," the Minister said.

"Andra?"

"Ay, Andra. That rantin' Judas."

"But Andra knows nothing," she said, more bewildered than ever. "Andra has no reason to connect me in any way with this Captain Stullen. . . ."

"Andra laid information against you last nicht. He declared on oath that he had overheard you talkin' to Stullen. He had the conversation aff verbatim. Declared he felt it his bounden duty as a Christian an' a law-abidin' citizen to inform agin ye."

Thirza sat stricken, white-faced, mouth open, her last hope drained away.

The Minister took off his wig as if in valediction and stared bareheaded out of the window. "Forewarned is forearmed," he said. "Or so they say. Ye were better to ken, Thirza."

She closed her eyes. She had just thought of something. John . . . her hopes . . . her dreams . . . her future . . . all gone. Everything finally and irrevocably gone. Oh, the tragedy of it! And first and more important than everything else put together . . . John. Oh, John. . . .

She said, whispering, "Who knows?"

"Very few. They've kept it a close secret. They wanted to be sure that naething went wrang."

"But who?" she pressed.

"The Provost. It wis the Provost that Andra went to. An' the Toun Clerk, of coorse. An' the Sheriff, an' Baillie Thom, an' the toun officer, an' a puckle ithers. Oh, an' anither thing ye'd better ken. They've sent for a detachment o' the military, but they're nae expectit afore the morn's morn."

At least it was unlikely that John would know . . . yet. And even if he heard he wouldn't believe it. He would defend her to the end. She tore her thoughts away from John, and by exercising all her will-power forced herself to concentrate on the immediate problem.

This was the end. There could be no disguising that. But although she was ruined there might still be something to be saved from the wreckage of her life, provided only she could think, think, think. . . .

"The banker?" she said. "Does he know?"

"Like enough. I dinna ken."

"And Carmichael?"

"I dinna ken, Thirza. I didna hear his name mentioned. Fit are ye thinkin' to dee?"

"I don't know yet," she said. She got up. She was proud of her control. Her legs were perfectly steady and her mouth obeyed its instructions and curved quite naturally in the shape of a smile. "I'll never forget this. I know how difficult it must have been for you to decïde to come and tell me. I can't say anything just now but thank you, but I do thank you . . . truly. . . ."

"Tush, lassie!" The wig was on now, askew and defiant. "Dinna tak' this ower hard. Ye've sown the win', ye maun reap the whirlwin'. But this is nae the end o' the warld, nae by a lang chalk. Ye're young, an' ye're healthy, an' ye're bonny an' a', an' if God wills that this should come till a court case, ye'll hae the jury wi' ye at the ootset an' the siller to hire a lawyer wi' logic on his tongue. Nivver say die, Thirza. Ye're nae bate yet."

She wasn't listening, but she had followed the gist of his remarks, and she flashed him a grateful smile.

"When did you say the military were due to arrive?"

"The morn's morn, I think. An' anither thing, Thirza. Dinna be bitter aboot Andra. The man's dementit. He's swallowed the Bible hale, an' he hisna the digestion for't. He's nae a' there. Dinna be bitter, lassie, fitever fa's, for smugglin's jist a prank but bitterness is a crime . . . ay, a crime agin your ain immortal soul."

"I'm not bitter," she said. "I don't blame Andra. I know there's nobody to blame except myself." She was ice-cold now, and her brain was working with brilliant clarity. There was so much to do. So little time to do it. She rang the bell and at the same time held out her hand to the Minister. "I'll never forget. . . ."

"Nae mair," he said. "I'll be back to see you later."

"Yes," she said. "Later," unaware that the word was leaving her mouth. "Jessie," she said to the maid. "will you please, after you

have shown the Minister out, tell Mistress Manson and the Dominie that I want to see them at once."

"I'll show masel' oot," the Minister said. "I ken the road."

"Will you?" Thirza said brightly. "And, Jessie, tell them I shall be in the sun-room. Good-bye, Mr. Simpson. At once, Jessie."

She ran upstairs to her office and rang for Mr. Donald.

She told him what had happened briefly and factually.

"Nobody knows where this will end," she said. "But as far as I can see, no particular suspicion rests on you. At least no more than you can reasonably hope to disprove. Your brother too. He can't deny that he received the stuff, but with these false receipts I made out for him he should be able to prove that he didn't know the stuff was smuggled. The crabbers are a different matter. They're compromised, and we'll deal with them presently. You'd better get them here, incidentally. And get them armed. I don't know how you'll do it. But do it. It may be vital. Pistols, muskets, knives, cudgels . . . anything. We've got to be prepared. . . ."

They both started as the door opened, and Manson and the Dominie, the housekeeper bridling, came in.

"Ah, you two," Thirza said. "Just a moment. Now, Mr. Donald, where were we? We'll want a boat. Better have two boats. Two boats would be safer. Each with good sails and a spare set of oars."

"In the creek?" Mr. Donald enquired, nodding at the window.

"No. Our own boat is on the beach there already. One boat to the east of the harbour and the other to the west. Ready for immediate departure if need be."

"Anything else, ma'am?"

"Yes. Let me see. You'd better do this yourself. Go down to the jail and see what you can find out. Be very surreptitious, because, as I've told you, the authorities know that I'm implicated. Find out if you can who knows and how much they know. Check on the information that the military won't be here till to-morrow and try to find out at what hour they are expected to arrive and in what strength. And, most important of all, find out for certain whether Captain Stullen is being kept in the jail or, if they've moved him for safety, where they've moved him to. And what guards he has, if any. I think that's all just now, Mr. Donald. I'm going out right away. Send somebody down to tell Alicky Mac to get the coach out

and at the door immediately. And, Mr. Donald, get back here in a couple of hours' time with the information, and have the crabbers here then too. Don't tell them anything. Don't tell anybody anything. Not even your brother. Now, is everything quite clear?"

"Quite clear," Mr. Donald said.

Their eyes met in a mutual appraisal, and with a tight little smile and a nod he turned away quickly and went out.

"Right," Manson said, before Thirza could speak. "So you've been found out. Weel, how serious is it?"

"Very serious," Thirza said. "But how did you know?"

"Oh, I've kent a' alang."

"What have you known?"

"A' there's been to know," Manson said impatiently.

Thirza blinked at them in turn.

"And you, Dominie?"

"Yes, I've known too."

She smiled at the absurdity of it. She had taken such elaborate precautions, had fondly imagined that no one knew of her association with Stullen, had shrunk from the thought, even now, of disclosing the truth to these two trusty friends. She had been afraid of shocking them, but it was they who were shocking her, with their knowledge and their casual acceptance of it.

"Everything's topsy-turvy," she said. "I don't know what is going to happen. The Coastguard cutter is in the Bay, and they have Captain Stullen imprisoned in the jail. They've sent for a detachment of the military, and I understand they're due here tomorrow morning. We owe all this to Andra. Appears Andra overheard a certain conversation I had with Captain Stullen last night. . . ."

"Ay," Manson said. "I knew he was here last night."

"Everybody seems to have known," Thirza said bitterly, "including Andra. And Andra promptly went and did his Christian duty by informing against us both."

"Ah, the snifterin' slype that he is!" Manson exclaimed. "I'll wring his neck wi' my ain twa han's. I'll . . ."

"Hush now," Thirza said. "What's done is done. We haven't time to waste on words. We've got to make plans. I'm going out to Carmichael House. There's a chance that Richard Carmichael

hasn't heard about this yet, and I have some unfinished business to settle with him. By the time I come back the situation may have clarified. But meantime we must be prepared for anything. Manson, will you get the cook to prepare a hamper. Chickens, hams, sandwiches, wine, and so on. And will you personally keep a watch on the Coastguard cutter and on the *Foolish Virgin*. Log everything that happens. Note it down here, with the times, in my book. . . ."

There was a knock at the door.

"Yes, Jessie?"

"The coach is outside, ma'am."

"Well, tell Alicky Mac I'll be down in a moment." As Jessie retired Thirza followed her to the door. She paused thoughtfully in the doorway. "Now what do I need? A cloak and hat only. . . . There's one other thing, Manson. It is just possible that by the time I return from Carmichael House the authorities may have arrived to take possession. Don't allow them to set foot in the house unless they have a search warrant. And if they do come, open the attic windows as a signal to me. Or if you're not able to get up to the attic, open the window of your own room from the bottom. Do you follow all that?"

"Perfectly," Manson said.

"What about me?" the Dominie enquired. "Isn't there something I could do, Thirza?"

"You could write me a paper on what to do next," Thirza said grimly, and then, seeing the disappointment in the Dominie's face, she laid a hand gently on his arm. "I know what you can do, Dominie. You know the bureau in my room? Force the drawers, including the secret drawer—Manson'll show you—and take out everything in them—every single thing—and dump them in the fire. Stand by and stoke them till the papers are all completely burned. Will you do that for me?"

"I'll do it," the Dominie said. "I only wish. . . ."

"Well, never mind that now," she said. "I must go. Look after things as best you can, Manson. I'll be back as soon as possible. . . ."

"But you haven't had any lunch, Thirza. . . ."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," Thirza said.

. . . . . .

As the coach emerged from the Drive on to the coast road Thirza had a new idea. She shouted to attract Alicky Mac's attention and countermanded her orders.

"No, not to Carmichael House yet. To Mr. Hosie's office first."

"Office'll be closed," Alicky Mac said. "He'll be at his meat."

"To his house then," she said.

Mr. Hosie was the sole partner of Hosie, Wood & Hosie, Solicitors. He was a young man not long qualified, and he owed his present eminence as head of the firm to his father's untimely death three or four months before. He had a keen and agile brain, and although his clientele was not to be compared in quality or in financial standing with that of the Town Clerk, there were already signs that in a few years' time he would encroach upon large tracts of business which the Town Clerk now regarded as his own.

Thirza liked and trusted young Mr. Hosie in direct proportion to her dislike and mistrust of his rival, Mr. Harkness, and she had already employed him to her entire satisfaction in several minor transactions. She would have been happier if he had had a little more experience, but she had no doubt that the business she now had in mind, although irregular and very unusual, was legally simple, and that young Mr. Hosie was perfectly competent to deal with it. . . .

She leaned forward and shouted again to Alicky Mac. "Not so fast now," she said. "Bring them down to a slow canter as we enter the town. We don't want to attract attention. Do you hear me, Alicky Mac?"

The horses entered the town at a discreet trot. Thirza, pressing back against the cushions, searched the streets in vain for signs of any untoward happening. Kaysie was so quiet that one might have thought it a Sunday. There was only a sprinkling of people on the pavements, and although those who were abroad stared at the coach, they did not appear to comment upon it. She felt reasonably sure that the news of Stullen's arrest had not yet leaked out, and quite certain that no one yet knew of her connection with him.

Mr. Hosie's house was a modern villa in the hill-town, built after the design of a house several times as large, and very imposing, if you could be imposed upon by caricatures, and most of the inhabitants of Kaysie could. As the horses slowed to a walk on the

steep Gurney Brae, Thirza cowered deeper into her cushions, feeling that now she was penetrating into enemy country, for here, in the compass of a few gracious streets, you could find all the power and money in the town. . . .

"This is the house now," she said.

She walked up the gravel path which exactly bisected the ornate front garden and rang the bell.

First it was the maid. Then old Mrs. Hosie, seventy-five years old, but still as sharp as a ferret, flashing out to do battle for her young against any woman who had the presumption to seek her son at such an hour.

"Oh, it's you, Mistress Skene!" she said, her hostility dissolving into a calculated obsequiousness as she recognised the firm's richest and most influential client. "My dear Mistress Skene. . . ."

"No, I won't come in," Thirza said briskly. "I just want to see Mr. Hosie." And with an effort of will she forbore to say that it was urgent.

"He's at his dinner. Won't you just step into the parlour, Mistress Skene, and I'll get him rightaway."

"As a matter of fact I'm going to take him with me," Thirza said, "so I'd be obliged if you'd request him to join me in my carriage."

"This very minute," Mrs. Hosie said. "This very minute, Mistress Skene. Alastair hasn't quite finished his dinner, but I know that won't prevent him coming out to you straightway the moment he knows you're here. Yes indeed, Alastair was saying to me—although, mind you, Mistress Skene, he never talks to me about his work. Close. Indeed yes. Close as a clam, I tell him. Just like his father. 'It's some time,' he was saying though, 'since I've seen Mistress Skene. I've been wondering if maybe she's indisposed.' Yes, that's what he was saying just the other day. 'Well, Alastair,' I said, 'there's only one way to find out. Just you go on up to the White House and ask after her and pay your respects. . . .'"

Thirza returned to the carriage and projected a breath like a missile at the roof.

"Talk!" she said, seething. And then to Alicky Mac, "Whenever Mr. Hosie joins me, drive off without any further instructions to Carmichael House. And when you leave the town drive these

horses as they've never been driven before. Every minute counts." She threw herself back in the seat, but could not relax. Every few seconds she cast an impatient glance up the gravel path to the open front door. "At a time like this," she said, writhing in her seat, "and he's probably changing his collar!"

Alastair Hosie came out briskly, his mother trailing behind him. He was smiling, and his easy, informal air irked her now that she felt she herself would never be gay and light-hearted again.

"And to what do I owe? . . ."

The banality of the man!

"Get in, please, Mr. Hosie. I'm in a hurry." And she contrived a smile for his mother. "Good-bye, Mrs. Hosie. Good-bye."

The coach started off immediately, and Mr. Hosie, who had not yet seated himself, was deposited heavily on her lap. Thirza assisted him energetically towards his own portion of the seat and sharply silenced his apologies. She said, "Let's get to the point, Mr. Hosie. Have you heard any rumours this morning?"

"I don't think so. No."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Quite sure. Ought I to have? What has happened, Mistress Skene?"

"Nothing," she said, "yet. And nothing you need to know. Now listen to me carefully. We're driving to Carmichael House. I have some business with Mr. Carmichael, but I'll tell you about that presently. Meantime, what I want to know is this. Is it in order for me to make certain dispositions of my own property while we are at Carmichael House? Time is pressing, and I don't want to waste a minute unnecessarily. Will it be legally in order?"

Mr. Hosie frowned. "What sort of disposition have you in mind?"

"A sort of will," she said.

"It would be quite in order to make a will anywhere. But I already have your will, Mistress Skene. Do you want to modify it in some way?"

"It's not exactly a will I'm thinking of," she said. "Rather, a series of gifts."

"You mean settlements," Mr. Hosie said. "It would really be much more convenient to discuss these matters and to make the

necessary arrangements in the office. There are certain set forms. . . ."

"Yes, yes, yes," she said. "I'm aware of all that. But your convenience doesn't enter into this. What I want to know is, if I make certain dispositions, written dispositions before witnesses in Carmichael House, will they be absolutely legal?"

"I think so," Mr. Hosie said. "It's just a matter of applying the necessary stamps. The forms I have in the office are stamped already, but there is really no reason why the stamps should not be appended afterwards."

"Good," she said. "Well, that's that. Now, the object of my visit to Carmichael House is to buy the *Advertiser*. You are aware, no doubt, that Mr. Carmichael now owns the *Advertiser*?"

"I had heard something to that effect."

"Well, as you know, I hold the title-deeds to Carmichael House. Mr. Carmichael's terms for the sale of the paper are the surrender of these deeds and the payment of a sum of five thousand pounds."

Mr. Hosie laughed aloud.

"I see no humour in the situation, sir."

"But surely," he said, "it's the price." He looked at her in sudden alarm. "You're not going to pay such an outrageous price, ma'am?"

"Yes," she said, "I am. And what I want you for, primarily, is to ensure that the documents of sale are drawn up in such a way that their legality can never be disputed."

"But, Mistress Skene," Mr. Hosie said earnestly, "as your lawyer it's my duty . . . I really must advise you. . . ."

"I appreciate your advice," she said. The coach was drawing up at the lodge gates of Carmichael House, and in the relative silence after the pounding of hooves and the racket of the racing wheels she found herself talking in a shout. "But I'd be obliged if you'd keep it to yourself, sir. Can't you see I want to think?"

(2)

Mr. Carmichael's study had not changed. Perhaps the glittering expanse of floor which caught your eye as the door opened did not glitter quite so brilliantly as in the days when Manson had been responsible for its surface, but otherwise everything was as it had always been. The huge desk still stood in its original position, com-

manding the room, and the walnut furniture—the book-cases and the cabinets—was grouped about it in the old familiar pattern. Even the wall-maps looked the same, although the markings might well be different, for Richard Carmichael's empire had dwindled by more than half in the course of the past few years.

Sinclair, too, was still in attendance, fat as ever, his head now totally bald but still obscene, his eyes devoid of recognition, and his manners worthy of a bishop. They waited until he had made his dignified exit—there were four of them in the room—Richard Carmichael and Robert on one side of the desk, and Thirza and Mr. Hosie on the other—then Richard Carmichael moved his clasped hands six inches across the desk and said, "Now, madam?"

"Just a minute, Father," Robert said. "If she's got her lawyer here shouldn't we have ours here too?"

Richard Carmichael ignored him altogether. His eyes were fixed on Thirza's face, and she was reminded of the previous occasion when she had seen him in this same room behind this same desk. Then, he had regarded her with just the same calculating and dispassionate scrutiny as now. And she could not help wondering whether Richard Carmichael also was remembering that other time so many momentous years ago. . . .

"Yes, madam?"

She said, "I've come about the paper. The *Advertiser*. You may remember. . . ."

"I remember."

"The price you suggested was five thousand pounds."

"I suggested no price, ma'am. I told you distinctly that the newspaper was not for sale, and in order to emphasise the fact I informed you that even if you offered me the title-deeds to this house along with the sum of five thousand pounds I doubted whether I could persuade my fellow directors to agree to a sale."

"But, Father . . ."

"Kindly hold your tongue, Robert."

"All right, Father. All I was going to say was that you ought to have Harkness here."

"Mr. Carmichael," Thirza said, "please don't trifle with me. I understood perfectly from our last meeting that the paper was not for sale—except on preposterous terms. Very well, I am prepared

to pay your preposterous terms. . . ." She could learn nothing from his face, but she fancied she saw both delight and incredulity in Robert's. "In return for the full and unqualified ownership of the *Kaysie Advertiser* I shall hand over the title-deeds of Carmichael House and pay you the sum of five thousand pounds."

"One minute, Mistress Skene," said the lawyer, who had been stirring uneasily. "As your legal adviser I must again register a protest. . . ."

"Please, Mr. Hosie!"

"In your own interests . . ."

"I am the best judge of my own interests. Kindly allow Mr. Carmichael and myself to settle this between us. You heard my offer, sir? What have you to say to it?"

"Very little," Richard Carmichael said. He stroked his chin and studied her. "I mentioned the figure of five thousand pounds at random. I shall require time to study every aspect of the situation and, in particular, to review the figure. I am by no means certain that the sum of five thousand pounds meets the circumstances."

"Please be quiet, Mr. Hosie," Thirza said as the lawyer leaned forward to speak again. "I should have told you, Mr. Carmichael, that a condition attaches to my offer. You must accept it now. I shall not make it again." That was truer than he could know. She would not have the opportunity of making it again. "I ask you to believe that. If you are agreeable, Mr. Hosie here can make out the necessary documents and we can sign them now. It's now or never."

"There's something behind all this, Father," Robert said. "I wish you'd send for Harkness."

Thirza felt the precious seconds ticking away, and she moved uneasily in her chair. There was still so much to be done, and any moment the authorities might decide to move against her. It was not impossible that at this very moment they might be on their way to Carmichael House to apprehend her. . . .

"What's your answer, Mr. Carmichael? Is it to be a sale or not?"

"I am opposed to hurried decisions," Richard Carmichael said. "I must consider this carefully. It is hard to estimate the value of the *Kaysie Advertiser* in sterling. I presume you meant five thousand pounds sterling, madam, and not Scotch."

"Yes, yes," she said. "Sterling."

He had not taken his eyes off her for a single second. "Now, if you had offered seven thousand pounds. . . ."

"Well, supposing I had?" she asked quickly. "If I had made you an offer of seven thousand pounds, what would your answer have been?"

"I should have accepted it."

"Very well," Thirza said. "Seven thousand pounds." There was no point in haggling. Speed was vital, and the price was now of little consequence. "Mr. Hosie, will you make out the necessary papers, and keep them short, please. Is that settled, Mr. Carmichael?"

He inclined his head.

"Father," Robert said, "I still think we ought to get Harkness out here."

"Mistress Skene," Mr. Hosie said urgently. "I beg you to listen to me. Seven thousand pounds is a vast sum of money. I know it is not altogether my affair . . ."

"Precisely," she said. "Oh, Mr. Carmichael, I think Mr. Hosie wishes to say that he requires paper and a quill."

Mr. Hosie accepted the articles with obvious reluctance. He said, "I am doing this entirely against my better judgment and against my will. . . ."

Thirza herself opened the ink-horn for him. "Do get on with it," she said. "There is another document—a long one—which I wish to discuss with you later, and time is getting short. I wonder, Mr. Carmichael, if I could use your desk to write a note of my own on?"

"By all means," Richard Carmichael said stiffly.

"If I could have a sheet of paper perhaps . . . and another quill. . . ."

"Robert! . . ." his father said.

On one side of the desk Thirza and the lawyer bent industriously over their papers, while on the other side the two Carmichaels watched and wondered.

Thirza wrote:

I wish to make the following settlements, to take effect as from to-day:

(1) Ownership of the *Kaysie Advertiser* and a contingency fund of five thousand pounds (to be used entirely at his discretion) to John MacPherson, Esquire.

(Would that be the last time that she would write his name? Her eyes blurred over with tears of self-pity, and she put up a hand to brush an imaginary hair from her forehead, and wrote quickly, with an undue scratching of her quill.)

(2) The herring curing business of William Skene & Company, including all premises and stock and all moneys standing to its credit in the separate banking account, jointly to William Donald, Esquire, Manager, and to the town of Kaysie in the proportion of 25 per cent to Mr. Donald and 75 per cent to the town. The management to be conducted by Mr. Donald during his lifetime. The Town Council to take whatever steps it considers necessary to appoint a board of representatives, etc., to safeguard the town's interest.

(That pleased her. That was her last blow at the Moray Frith . . . the death-blow.)

(3) The offal business of William Skene & Company, including all premises and stock, etc., but excluding the moneys standing to its credit in the separate offal account, jointly to George Mair, Esquire, Manager, and to Willie Gun, Geordie Wood, and Tarry Bowie, fishermen, and to the Fishertown of Kaysie, in the proportion of 10 per cent to the Manager, 5 per cent to each of the fishermen. The remaining 75 per cent to the Fishertown. The Town Council to control on behalf of the Fishertown, and to appoint to the Board of Management *residents* of the *Fishertown only*.

(4) All boats in which I have shares (there are 53, I think) to be handed over, free of all obligation, to those fishermen with whom I at present share the boats, i.e. my interest in all boats other than those which I own solely or which are registered in the name of William Skene & Company to be cancelled forthwith.

(5) £5,000 to Hannah Manson, Spinster, my housekeeper.

(6) £1,000 to my father, Alexander Gare, 3, Seaview Place, Portknockie.

(7) £250 to my brother Andrew Gare.

(8) The White House, with all it contains, to the town of Kaysie, to be used as a School for Ragged Children. (It is requested that J. C. Christie, Esquire, Master of Arts, be employed as a master here.)

(9) £2,000 to endow Bathia Gare bursaries for fisher-children at Kaysie Grammar School.

(How my mother would have liked that!)

(10) £1,000 to the Town Council to purchase and equip a public park, for recreational purposes. To be known as the William Skene Park.

(11) £5,000 to the Free Kirk Presbytery to build and equip a new Free Kirk, on condition that the steeple transcends the steeple of the Auld Kirk by at least 15 feet. (It should be possible to install a new modern organ. And I should like to see all the pews covered.)

(12) £1,000 to the Free Kirk Presbytery to be used exclusively, *note exclusively,* to build and furnish a Free Kirk manse to the specifications of John Simpson, Esquire, Minister. The Manse to be the residence of John Simpson, Esquire, during his lifetime, and, in the event of his death, to pass for the duration of her life to his widow. Thereafter to revert to the Kirk Session.

(13) The residue of my estate (I don't know how much this will be, but something in the nature of £40,000) to be used to promote the construction of the new Fishertown harbour in whatever manner the Harbour Commissioners deem fit.

She wrote very quickly, and she had finished this entire document before the lawyer had finished his copper-plate scripting. As she waited, she swiftly reviewed her dispositions. She was well satisfied with them, feeling she had made the best of a bad job. . . .

Mr. Hosie pushed a sheet of paper along to her and said, "You

sign here, Mistress Skene . . . that is, if you're still determined to enter into this agreement."

She signed immediately and passed the document across the table to Richard Carmichael, who read it through carefully and then slowly appended his signature.

"We shall require witnesses," Mr. Hosie said. "Perhaps two of your servants, Mr. Carmichael. . . ."

"I shall also require witnesses for this document of mine," Thirza said, tapping her own sheet of paper. And she could not resist saying, "I think it would be very appropriate if Mr. Carmichael and Mr. Robert Carmichael would agree to put their names to it."

CHAPTER X

(1)

THE BUSINESS AT CARMICHAEL HOUSE had taken longer than Thirza had bargained for, and it was after four o'clock when she bade Alicky Mac ease the sweating horses at the White House gates.

Manson and Mr. Donald were both in the sun-room, Manson at the telescope and Mr. Donald seated at her desk, writing, and both swung round with a start as she opened the door and both immediately began to speak.

Thirza looked at them in turn. "One at a time," she said. "What's the position, Mr. Donald? What have you found out?"

"Quite a bit, ma'am. I was just writing it down for you." He crumpled up the paper under his hand and dropped it in the waste-paper basket. "Stullen's still in the jail. There don't appear to be any guards at all, except old George Whyntie, of course, and his son. There are two lawyers out from Aberdeen, and they've been examining Stullen all day, but as far as I could learn they've got nothing out of him. The Coastguards arrived in the Bay, as you know, before you left the house. They came straight into the harbour, and the officer was closeted for about an hour in the Town House with the Provost and the Sheriff."

"Who's the officer?" Thirza asked. "Is it Auchinachie?"

"Yes, ma'am. Then he went off in the cutter again, and it was only then that the story got about in the town that Stullen had been arrested. The whole town's buzzing with it now, of course."

"What about me?" she said. "Are they talking about me too?"

"I don't think so, ma'am. I didn't hear any mention of your name. But the place is seething with rumours. Everybody seemed to know that the Coastguards were going out to take possession of Stullen's ship, and so I took the liberty of setting off a couple of rockets. . . ."

"Where from?" she said sharply.

"The braehead."

"Good." She was relieved. "It wouldn't have done if they'd been set off from the White House. And while we're on the subject of precautions, take that sheet of paper with your handwriting on it out of the waste-paper basket and burn it. Go on, Mr. Donald. What happened? I see the ship is still at anchor."

"Yes, they saw our signals. . . ."

"They signalled back wi' a mirror," Manson said. "I. saw the flashes masel'. . . ."

". . . But they didn't pay any attention to the warning, ma'am. At least, not as far as we could see. And the cutter's alongside them now, and the Coastguards are aboard them."

Manson took up the tale. "Ay, that's right. I've been watchin' through the telescope. There was a lot o' runnin' aboot on the deck an' parleyin' afore they let the Coastguards on board. . . ."

"But no fighting?"

"Na, na. Nae fechtin'."

"All right," Thirza said. "So far so good. Anything else? How about the crabbers, Mr. Donald?"

"They're all waiting downstairs, ma'am."

"Armed?"

"I have some pistols and cutlasses," Mr. Donald said. "But I thought it better not to distribute them meantime, ma'am."

She nodded. She was very well pleased with Mr. Donald.

"But there is one other thing, ma'am. Bad news I've been keeping to the last. That last consignment of stuff, wines, that we sent off as herrings yesterday. Colin Stewart, who works in the Town Clerk's office, told me confidentially that it was to be held up in the station at Glasgow. They got the address from the registration counterfoil, and they've sent a telegram on to Glasgow from Aberdeen. There's no doubt he was speaking the truth, ma'am."

"That's very serious," Thirza said. That alone was enough to convict her, or would be, once the authorities had opened the barrels. She took a deep breath and looked first at Mr. Donald and then at Manson, and they looked back at her soberly. "Well, at least it gives us time," she said. "We can be thankful there's no telegraphic apparatus in Kaysie. It means a messenger will have to

bring back the reply from Aberdeen. What about the boats, Mr. Donald?"

"Both ready, ma'am. And fully equipped. Including rope ladders."

"And the hampers," Thirza said to Manson. "Has Cook prepared them?"

"Lang ago. There's one in each boat."

Thirza paced the room. "Analysing the situation, then, very little has happened except that the Coastguard has presumably taken possession of the *Foolish Virgin*." (This was no time to quibble about names.) "That is unfortunate, but it had to be expected. At the present time—until they've opened these barrels in Glasgow—the authorities have no more evidence of my complicity in this affair than they had last night when Andra informed on me. By the way, where is Andra?"

"He's in his room," Manson said. "Locked in. We had some trouble efter you left. The Dominie went up stairs to tell Andra fit he thocht o' him, an' there was a bit o' a carfuffle."

"You mean, there was a fight?"

"Fegs, it was nae fecht. There's neither o' them could hairm a flea. But they ca'd a' the lamps doun on the tap landin', an' I dinna ken fit they didna fling at each ither, but they wouldna have had as much as a scratch on them if they hadna fallen doun the stairs. I had a gey job patchin' them up, I can tell ye, what wi' cuts and sprains, an' nae sooner had I finished wi' them than they up an' started pinnin' things at each ither again. I was in nae mood for't, and so I packed them baith into their bedrooms and locked them in. And noo it seems that the Dominie's catched a fever—it's that welt in his heid that's the trouble—an' last time I was in to see him he was lyin' stark naked on his bed recitin' away in Latin or Greek or ene o' them dead languages."

"My champion!" Thirza said with a smile. "Well, it's good to know that something funny has happened to-day. But to get back to the subject. We can depend upon it, I think, that no matter how many questions they put to Captain Stullen and no matter how cunningly they put them, Captain Stullen will not give anything away. And I don't think they'll dare to move against me on suspicion only. Even if they find the stuff aboard the *Virgin*, which I

doubt, that won't implicate me. It's this Glasgow business that we have to be on guard against. That's the crux of the situation now. They'll move against me whenever they get the reply from Glasgow. The question is, when will they get it? Has there been a train from Aberdeen since eleven, Mr. Donald?"

"There's the twelve-three," Mr. Donald said. "But it leaves Aberdeen long before eleven. And the next one, of course, is the evening train."

"Which is due in here at seven." She looked at the French ormolu clock on the mantelpiece. "That gives us almost two hours. Of course, if the messenger returned on horseback from Aberdeen, he'd be here a great deal sooner, but I don't think that's likely. The time problem isn't worrying them as it's worrying me. Just the same, Mr. Donald, I think you'd better post a man at the foot of the Drive to keep a watch on the town road and to report if he sees any body of men approaching. We don't want to be caught unprepared. But I think we can take it that the messenger will return with the telegraph on the seven o'clock train. By the way, did you hear any word of the military?"

"Just that they're to be here to-morrow."

"Good. Well, I propose to have something to eat now, and after that, in half an hour exactly, I'd like to speak to the crabbers. I'll see them up here. I'll give out the arms, then. Leave them under my desk."

"Will you require me too, ma'am?" Mr. Donald enquired.

"No," she said. "You'd better be about in case anything crops up for you to deal with. But I don't want you to be identified with any of the active steps we may have to take. Just one more thing, Mr. Donald, and I'd better say it now. I deeply appreciate all your help. I can't imagine what I should have done without you. I want you to know that I'm grateful."

They looked each other in the eyes.

"That sounds like a farewell speech, ma'am," Mr. Donald said, smiling.

"Well," she said, "you never know. It might be."

(2)

They filed, their faces grave and embarrassed, into the sun-room.

Although they lived in the bothy by the stables, none of them had laid foot in the White House before, and even if they had not been aware of the day's frantic comings and goings, the firing of the rockets, and the rumours in the town, this summons to the upstairs office would in itself have been enough to warn them that something was amiss. There were five of them, all young unmarried men, tough, hard-bitten fishermen whom Thirza had chosen with the greatest of care to act as her "crabbers." They stood just inside the door, all hands and feet, and Thirza, regarding them fondly, felt a momentary qualm as she thought of the sacrifice she must now ask of them. The door opened suddenly, and Alicky Mac sidled in and tacked himself unobtrusively on to the group.

Thirza frowned. "It was only the crabbers I sent for," she said to the old coachman. "I don't require you meantime."

"Fit's 'at, missus?"

"She disna want you," a pair of voices informed him.

"I'll jist bide," Alicky Mac announced. "I ken there's trouble on the brew. I served William Skene a' his life, and I served Willie Skene, the first, his feyther afore him, an' if there's trouble on the brew I got mair richt to be here nor onybody. . . ."

"All right, all right," Thirza said. "I really don't see that it matters. Will somebody make sure that the door is properly closed."

"It's closed all right, ma'am."

"Now, men, I have bad news for you. Captain Stullen has been arrested, and information has been laid against me. I'm afraid that you're all implicated. There can be no point in putting forward as a defence the argument that you did not know the type of goods you were handling. If you are arrested your fates will be the same as mine, transportation or a long period of imprisonment, or both."

There was a slight uneasy movement of feet. She looked searchingly from face to face, and they stared back stolidly at her.

"Now it seems to me to be my duty to attempt to rescue Captain Stullen. But in all fairness I must admit that this is not in any way your duty. With me, it is a personal obligation. It is my intention, therefore, to free Captain Stullen, if need be by force of arms. This may be a dangerous undertaking, although my information is that there are no special guards at the jail. I would naturally like you to help me in this, but I have no real right to ask it. If any of

you are caught it will undoubtedly increase the gravity of the charges against you and, in addition, there is always the possibility that you may be killed or wounded. On the other hand, if you are willing to continue in my service and to assist me in this venture, and if my plans work out successfully, I think I may promise that I shall be able to reward you all handsomely."

She looked again at the row of grave, stolid faces.

"Well," she said, "that's all I can say at the moment. The military are to be here to-morrow, and if we're to act at all we must act to-night—in fact, now, whenever it's dusk."

There was a scuffling as Willie Wood, whom she had first known as a child of her own age on the braehead, was jostled from the back of the little assembly to the front. He cleared his throat and worked his shoulders defiantly.

"Well, Willie," she said, "what is it?"

"We'll need weapons," Willie said.

She smiled. "I have some all ready for you. Am I to gather then that you're willing to act with me?"

There was an incoherent chorus which she took to be assent.

Thirza was very pleased. "I'll do the best I can for you all," she said. "I can't say more now, because I don't know how this will turn out." She went to her desk and pulled from under it the box which Mr. Donald had stowed there. She investigated the contents, assessing the value of each weapon as best she could, and then she handed them out—a pistol and a cutlass to each man.

"Fit aboot me, missus?" Alicky Mac enquired.

She shook her head. "I don't suppose you've even heard a word of what I've been saying."

"I'm nae sae deef as ye sometimes think." He held out his hand. "Gimme ma pistol, missus."

"No, no, I appreciate your wanting to come, but you're an old man. . . ."

"I may be aul', missus, but I can still pull a trigger wi' the best. An' anyroad, I'm ower aul' to serve a new maister. I'll jist come alang wi' you."

"It means exile," she said shouting. "And possibly great privations. . . ."

"So be it, Missus. Gimme ma pistol."

She gave him a pistol. She could think of nothing else to do.

"Now, men," she said, "I want you to listen carefully. Do any of you know Geordie Whyntie well? The Town Officer, I mean?"

"We a' ken him."

"But who knows him best?"

"Weel," Willie Wood said, "micht be Eck. Eck wis coortin' his docther year afore last, afore she got merried. . . ."

"I nivver wis. That's a damned lee, Willie Widdie. . . ."

"But you *do* know him, Eck," Thirza intervened.

"Oh, I ken him a' richt."

"All right," she said. "Now listen. First of all I want you all to conceal your weapons on your persons and make your way separately into Kaysie. There'll be a lot of people about in the streets, and nobody will notice you provided you don't all bunch together. You all know where the jail is. By seven o'clock you must all be in the Low Street near the jail. Willie, you'll be in charge of this operation. Now, there's bound to be a crowd at the jail, but they'll be watching the main gates in the Low Street. When the clock starts striking seven—it should be pretty dark by then—I want each of you to enter the close up the side of the jail. There's a door there, a sort of side door to the jail, which Geordie Whyntie uses as his house door, as you'll know, Eck. . . ."

"Ay, but the door's aye barred an' bolted when there's a prisoner inbye."

"That doesn't matter," she said. "When you're all gathered in the close—that is, at seven o'clock sharp—you, Eck, will knock on the side-door and say that you want to see Geordie, or, if Geordie himself answers, tell him to open up, that you have an urgent message for him. I think you could say it was from his daughter. Meg, isn't it?"

"Ay. Meg."

"Well, you say you have a message from Meg, and say it's important. The moment he opens the door you must silence him. I know I can leave the details of that to you, Willie. Get the cell keys . . . he'll probably be carrying them. By the way, you'd better take ropes with you. Then you'll have to enter the jail and deal with Geordie's wife and son. There should be no difficulty about that. Set Captain Stullen free, give him a fisherman's jersey and cap, and

come out the way you entered, making sure that the Whynties are well tied up. . . . Shove something into their mouths too, so that they can't possibly raise the alarm. You must then separate again. One of you . . . it had better be you, Willie . . . accompany Captain Stullen along the Low Street to the Auld Kirk. I shall be waiting for you there with my carriage. The rest of you make for Chalmers' Cove, where there's a boat waiting just to the west of the Granny rocks. You know the little cove there?"

They knew.

"If anything should go wrong, there's another boat to the eastward of the harbour at the entrance of the old cave. But unless you run into serious trouble, make for the Chalmers' Cove boat. Is that all clear? And remember, no unnecessary violence. You should be able to tie the Whynties up without injuring them unduly. And be especially careful about the time. Start moving into the close the moment the town clock strikes seven. You should be out of the prison and well on your way to Chalmers' Cove by ten-past seven. Is there anything anybody wants to ask?"

Willie Wood said, "Mebbe it would be best jist to start at the beginnin' an' say it a' ower again."

"All right," Thirza said, "Listen. . . ."

(3)

It was 6.30 p.m., and dusk was on the way. Thirza, descending the White House steps to the coach, noted with satisfaction that the sharp edge had already gone from her vision, and that the fir-trees along the Drive had thrown umbrellas of darkness across their roots. The sky was overcast, and there was a fresh sou'westerly wind. The weather could not have been more propitious for her venture, and she hoped it was an omen of success.

As the coach started off, she leaned as far forward as she could, devouring the house with her eyes, aware, although as yet only with surface pangs, that this was the last time she would ever see it, and as she stared she saw a sudden peremptory flutter of light at the door and simultaneously thought she heard, above the crunch of the wheels on the gravel, the sound of Manson's urgent voice.

"Stop the coach!" she shouted. "Stop, Alicky Mac!"

The carriage creaked to a standstill, and Manson's great bulk, jellying as it ran, emerged from the shadows astern.

"It's the cutter, Thirza!" she panted. "It's just left the ship."

"You mean, it's pulling away? With the Coastguards in it?"

"Ay. Some o' them, anyway. I didna think there were so many got into the boat as got oot o' it earlier."

Thirza considered that. "I suppose you couldn't actually see," she said, "whether the men were the Coastguards or some of the crew of the ship."

"Fegs," Manson said, "glass an' all, there wasn't one o' them bigger than a matchstick. But anyway, I thocht I'd better tell ye."

"Yes," Thirza said. "I'm glad you told me."

"And you'll take care o' yourself, dearie?"

(Manson thought she was merely going to see Mr. Hosie, the solicitor.)

"I'll be careful, Manson."

"And you'll be back soon?"

"As soon as I can," Thirza said. She was tempted to throw her arms round Manson's neck and give her beloved old friend one last passionate embrace, but she reminded herself, as she had been reminding herself all afternoon, that the housekeeper must not be allowed to suspect her intentions. If Manson knew what she planned to do, Manson would certainly insist on accompanying her, and there could be no place, and no happiness, for a conventional old creature like Manson in the unknown and fearsome future that lay ahead. It was much kinder that she should slip away without as much as a word of farewell. Much kinder, and much, much better. Afterwards—if there was an afterwards—she would write. And Manson would understand. . . .

There now, she was just a blur against the trees as she stood, solid as teak, in the middle of the Drive, waving that absurd frilly apron she always would wear. Never to see Manson again! Never. Manson, who had been father and mother and brother and sister to her all those years. Manson, who trusted and loved her as no one ever had or ever would again. . . .

She sniffed and cleared her throat. There was no use crying over spilt milk. No use crying at all. She flicked first one cheek and then

the other with her gloved wrist, and forced herself to contemplate her immediate exigency. . . .

What difference did this new development make? Why should the Coastguard cutter be coming ashore? The thought that had sprung immediately to her mind was that the Coastguards were taking the crew of the *Foolish Virgin* to jail, and that was possible, but not very likely. Stullen's crew would no doubt be battened down in one of the holds on board, and there was, from the authorities' point of view, less danger in leaving them there than in bringing them ashore in the dark. No, the likeliest explanation was that a skeleton crew of Coastguards had been left on board, and that the others—the men whom Manson had seen leaving—had been summoned ashore either to provide a guard for the jail or to search the White House for dutiable goods.

She sat bolt upright, her mouth open and her eyes thoughtful. There were possibilities here. She had already noted that the wind was from the sou'west and that the tide was on the ebb. It would, therefore, be a hard pull for the Coastguards, and she could take it as definite that they would not reach the shore until some time after seven o'clock, that was, until after Captain Stullen was freed. Whereas their own little boat, the one that was waiting now at Chalmer's Cove, could, with all sail set and the fair wind on the quarter, reach the *Foolish Virgin* in a matter of fifteen or twenty minutes. Yes, there were possibilities here, but it was for Captain Stullen to assess them. . . .

She took her little necklace watch out of the bosom of her dress and held it close to her face.

Fourteen minutes to seven. There was plenty of time. She rapped sharply twice on the driver's partition, and Alicky Mac, understanding the signal, slowed the horses first to a trot and then to a walk. In this sober fashion the carriage proceeded over the bridge and, a few minutes later, entered the town.

Even a stranger would have known that there was something afoot in Kaysie this evening. The pavements were crowded, and everywhere people, talking together excitedly, spilled over into the cobbled streets. It was as well, Thirza thought, watching from her window, that she had allowed herself plenty of time, for horse traffic on the Low Street was almost at a standstill, and as they

came alongside the jail (eight minutes to seven) the crowds were so dense that the horses had to bore their way through with repeated halts, Alicky Mac standing up on the driving seat prodding with his whip.

As they proceeded the road gradually cleared, and at the far end of the Low Street there was no congestion at all. There were only a few people about, and those few paid no attention to the carriage.

Thirza consulted her watch again. It was two minutes to seven, and she estimated she had just time to do the one thing she wanted above all else to do: see John MacPherson once more.

As the coach came alongside the offices of the *Kaysie Advertiser* she rapped three times to Alicky Mac. The coachman halted the horses and leaned down. This had not been included in his instructions. "You want me to stop here?"

"Certainly." She stepped briskly from the carriage. It was only when her foot touched the road that she had her first misgiving. "I shan't be long," she said, and, with her heart in her mouth, she opened the outside ramshackle door of the *Advertiser* office and stepped into the dimly-lit outer room.

She had not stood here since she was a child, since the day she had come to ask the editor to insert a letter about her dog, Davy, but the room was still precisely as she remembered it. A long desk counter ran its whole length, and on the other side of the counter, seated by and resting his feet on a small stove, was a young man reading a periodical. He glanced up and grunted at the sound of the door, and then, recognising her, jumped to his feet.

"Good evening, Mistress Skene."

"Good evening," she said, her voice strange and taut. "Could I see . . . Mr. MacPherson?" She had never felt so nervous. The palms of her hands were moist with sweat and she felt her clothes sticking to her body. Her chest was hurting, and her heart was galloping audibly. To see him just once more, that was all she asked. Just to see him. "Mr. MacPherson? . . ."

"I'm afraid not," the young man said. "He left early. He's going out to dinner to-night."

"Out to dinner!" she repeated stupidly.

"That's what he said, ma'am."

Tears began to squeeze out of the corners of her eyes, and her

vision blurred over, so that in place of a handsome young man she saw a vast, vibrating, jelly-like caricature of a human being. Her shoulders slipped down from their rigid position, and her whole body softened as though the bones had been taken from it. All the wild tumultuous excitement of a second ago had drained away like a wave sliding off sand, and in its place was a grey and dismal desolation. The tears grew and multiplied and flowed unchecked.

"Is there anything I can do, ma'am?"

She neither heard nor saw him. To think that it had been only this morning that she had planned her dinner-party with so much hope and happiness! And to think that, in the press of the day's events, she had forgotten, of all things, that John was to come to dinner! He would be at the White House now, no doubt, talking to Manson. . . .

She had wanted so little. Only to see him. To hear his voice. To touch his hand. Just for a minute, and for the last time. And now even this was to be denied her, this memory, this one last beautiful memory that she had relied on taking away with her and had meant to cherish for ever. Even this denied her! She was sodden with bitterness and self-pity, and the tears gushed down her rigid, unconcealed face.

"Mistress Skene! Ma'am. . . ."

But it was not the young man's concern that roused her. It was the sudden metallic striking of the mantelpiece clock. She shook her head like a dog that has just stepped out of the sea and looked at the clock on the mantelpiece and then looked at the young man. She looked at him without apparent interest.

"You must have been here a long time," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," the young man said, startled.

"I've seen you before. I remember when I was a little girl . . . you were just a boy then. You were over there, playing with a piece of string. I remember you well."

"I remember you too, ma'am," the young man said, politely but nervously. "Is there any message you would like me to give Mr. MacPherson?"

"No," she said. Hope flared anew. "Yes. Tell him . . ." The hope died still-born. "Tell him . . ." But what was there to tell him? What could be said? What sentence or group of sentences

spoken by Thirza Skene to John MacPherson could now mean anything at all? She drew in her breath. "Just tell him . . . I called," she whispered, and turned and groped her way out to the carriage.

(4)

Now the coach was drawn up in the shadows of the Auld Kirk, and the waiting began.

Alicky Mac got down from his seat and, in silence for once, stood peering along the road that led to the Low Street. Thirza took out her watch. She could barely see the dial, and it was only after a long scrutiny that she came to the conclusion that the time was five minutes past seven. The hum of voices, like a distant swarm of bees, floated in at the carriage window, and she found it impossible to concentrate on her own personal grief. Her bitterness began to disintegrate and was replaced by an insidious excitement. . . .

What was happening down there in the town? Her men must have been in the jail for several minutes. Could it be that something had gone wrong with the plan? Supposing, just supposing Geordie Whyntie had refused to open the door? Supposing . . . Countless dire suppositions flitted through her mind, and when Alicky Mac spoke, close by her, she almost screamed with alarm.

"Hist!" Alicky Mac said. "Lissen!"

There were people approaching from the Low Street. A group of four or five. But it was a false alarm. She heard girls' voices raised in the strident way girls raise their voices to youths, and she relaxed slowly, limb by limb. The party, loitering, giggling, and exclaiming, intent only on its own silly business, came alongside the coach, passed, and gradually faded into the farther shadows. Thirza took out her watch, examined it again, and held it to her ear. She began to count under her breath. "One and two and three and . . ."

When she came to a hundred she gave up, and, in a spasm of impatience, drummed her heels, rat-tat-tat, unmindful and unnoticing, on the carriage floor. Something had gone wrong. . . .

"There's them noo!" Alicky Mac said. He ran past the window and, with unprecedented agility, swung himself into the driving seat. She heard the flick of the whip in the air as he limbered his arm in preparation and the horses, sensing the human urgency, began to move off.

"Whoa!" Alicky Mac shouted. "Whoo, whoa!" And the coach lurched and creaked to a standstill.

Thirza thrust her head out of the window.

She saw the two men clearly enough to be sure that Stullen was one of them. He was so big that you could not easily mistake him, and, in addition, he was limping. She had forgotten his injured foot, and it occurred to her briefly that this was a very forgetful day. Their progress was maddeningly slow. . . .

She pushed open the carriage door.

"Evening, ma'am."

"Thank God you're here. You get up in front," she said to Willie Wood, "with Alicky Mac. And do be quick. Come in, Captain Stullen."

"You've done well, ma'am," Stullen said. The coach swayed and creaked as he put his foot on the step. His body blocked out the light, and she felt the familiar exciting masculine odour of tobacco and rope. "Yes, you've done a good job to-night."

She leaned over him and pulled the door shut, and the coach immediately jolted forward.

"There was no trouble then?" she said.

"None. We had a little bother with the old lady before we got her mouth stuffed, but the rest was easy. Your man says you've got a boat ready?"

"Yes. We're heading for it now."

"And then?"

"Then it's up to you," she said. She closed her eyes and sighed, not altogether unhappily. She had done her duty. She had rescued him. And now . . . well, now nothing was of much consequence. It did not much matter what happened. Even if they were all captured. At least she had done what she had set out to do. She had squared her account with Stullen, and nothing that might now happen could alter that. She opened her eyes and looked at Stullen and smiled, and he put his hand on her knee and squeezed it gently. "It's up to you now," she repeated.

"Right," he said. "I'll take over as from now. But first I've got to know what's been happening. They've taken my ship, have they?"

"I gather so," she said. "The Coastguards went on board early

this afternoon, and they've been on board ever since. But you might like to know that about an hour ago several of them left the ship in the cutter and presumably there's only a skeleton crew now on board."

"A skeleton crew," he said softly. "Yes, I like to know that."

She felt him thinking.

"It seems easy, ma'am," he said at last. "How many men have you?"

"Just the five you saw. And the old coachman. Six in all."

"And they're all armed?"

"Yes, they're all armed. But do you think they will be enough?"

"Plenty," Stullen said. "What about the small boat? Is she seaworthy?"

"All my boats are seaworthy," she said.

"Sails?"

"Yes."

"We'll need ladders. Is there a rope on board so that we can rig up ladders?"

"There are already ladders on board, Captain Stullen."

Stullen threw back his head and laughed aloud, and his hand tightened on her knee until the pressure was uncomfortable. "Ma'am," he said admiringly, "you're a caution. You think of everything."

With an adroit movement she brushed his hand from her knee.

"A reg'lar caution," he said.

She smiled faintly. She was inclined to agree with him.

(5)

They were all aboard the boat, Stullen at the helm and Thirza by him in the stern sheets, the crabbers and Alicky Mac grouped amidships, and Stullen had just given the order to cast off when they became aware of a ghostly figure, a white smudge against the darkness of the land, clambering in frantic haste across the rocks towards them. They sat in silence, watching intently, hands on pistol butts.

The apparition was unquestionably human. Its feet clattered on the rocks, dislodging stones, and, as it approached, its whiteness began to take on the outlines of a voluminous frock.

"It's a woman!" somebody whispered.
"Thirza! Thirza, wait! . . ."
But no woman ever had a voice like that.
"Thirza, wait for me!"
"It's the Dominie," Thirza said.
Everyone relaxed, and there was a titter amidships.
"The what?" Stullen demanded.

"The Dominie," she said impatiently. "The schoolmaster."

"You want to take him with us?"

The boat had drifted a few yards off the rocks.

"No. Yes," she said. "I mean, I suppose we'll have to." And Stullen, with a shrug of his shoulders, put his hand on the tiller and the boat's bows swung back towards the land. The Dominie, clad only, as far as the eye could see, in nightshirt and boots, his head swathed in bandages, slithered off the rocks and, panting like a grampus, waddled waist-deep into the sea to reach them. Half a dozen hands stretched over the gunwales and unceremoniously bundled him into the boat.

"Thought I should never . . . overtake you," the Dominie panted. "I've been pursuing you . . . all the way . . . from the Auld Kirk."

Thirza smiled. "You mean, you ran through the town like that . . . in your night-shirt?"

"Couldn't . . . help it," the Dominie gasped. "She . . . took my clothes away. She's . . . a very determined woman." And he flopped back in the bottom of the boat, completely winded, puffing and whistling. Thirza's eyes met Stullen's, and he shook his head in mock bewilderment.

"It's not an army you got, ma'am," he said. "It's a zoo. Now listen, men. . . ."

The sails had the wind now. They billowed out taut, and the wind drummed and sang in them.

". . . Listen, men; I'm aimin' to make a wide sweep, an come up on the *Virgin* from seaward. We'll take her amidships, just abaft the galley. My men'll be battened down below. . . . I reckon they'll be in the for'r'd hold . . . and whenever we set foot on board I want two of you, you and you . . ."

Thirza gazed across the Bay. The cliffs and trees and the summit

of the town, the spires and roofs and chimneys, were darkly outlined against the lighter sky, and away to the east she could see her own cliffs and her own house, its white walls still discernibly white. She concentrated her gaze on it, placing the windows and searching for lights. There were no signs of life, but she knew that Manson would be glued to the telescope in the sun-room, staring unintelligently across the Bay with her landsman's eyes, perhaps even watching the small boat now as it spanked out to sea. And John might be there too, probing Manson for information, uneasily awaiting her return. Her return! Ah well, he would wait for a long time. . . .

She closed her eyes and existed only in her own private little world of misery, and then Stullen's voice by her side, crisp, low, slightly nasal, gradually encroached upon and finally dominated her consciousness. She listened attentively to the latter part of his instructions.

"Right then," Stullen said softly, "You all know what to do in a general way, but once you're on board, if you see anything better to do, well do it an' be damned. Now, any questions?"

"Would it nae be quicker," Willie Wood said, "if we a' went up one ladder instead o' rowin' the boat aft an' fixin' anither ladder for the second pairty?"

"It would be quicker," Stullen said. "But not so effective. The second party should be able to take the guards by surprise, an' surprise is half the battle. Anything else?"

"One thing," Thirza said. "There must be no unnecessary violence."

"Ma'am," Stullen said, "there's no such thing as unnecessary violence. I'm in charge here, an' I'll give the orders. This job will take all the violence we've got, an' to spare. This is no Sunday School outing. Understand this, all of you. You're fightin' for your lives. If we don't take my ship, every man jack o' us, an' mebbe you too, ma'am, will be strung up like a row o' kippers. An' so for Christ sake, an' beggin' your pardon, ma'am, let's have no more talk of unnecessary violence."

"It was just," Thirza said, "that I see no point in *killing*."

"There's less point in being killed," Stullen said. "Now harken, I aim to leave her bows half a mile to the west'ard an' come up on her astern. If we're hailed, one of you . . . you there . . ."

"Me?" Willie Wood said.

"Yes, you. If we're hailed, you reply, 'Fishin' ', an' we'll lie off an' come in on another tack."

The *Foolish Virgin* was visible now as a great black hulk dominating the horizon. By daylight and seen from the White House she was a long, lean, raking ship with a low freeboard, but from the small boat in the dark she looked immense, her sides rising high like the walls of a fortress, and Thirza, peering anxiously at her, could scarcely credit that the short rope ladders in the boat would reach up to her rails.

The wind was abeam now, and Stullen whispered an order to the crabbers to bear out the clew with a spar as the boat, lurching in the choppy sea, bore straight for the clipper's stern. The men sat motionless and in absolute silence, every eye probing the darkness ahead, intent on their enormous prey. Thirza took a tight grip on the gunwales. Every minute she expected to hear a hail from the *Foolish Virgin,* but meantime the little boat, silent save for the soft swish as the bows cut the waves, sped down on the clipper, and out to seaward the fishing-boats, the nearest only a few cables away, unconcernedly began to hoist the masthead lanterns as they heaved their gear overboard. . . .

They could see the *Foolish Virgin* clearly, the low, rounded stern rocking gently, and the towering masts—the mainmast was over eighty feet high—swaying in emphasis of the ship's movement. And now they were abeam the clipper, and still no hail, and Thirza could see the ship from stem to stern—the gleaming figure-head for'r'd, the raking deckline, the elaborate tracery of the ratlins, and a faint gleam of light at the galley door. A sudden ominous clanking froze her breath in her throat until she realised that it was only the sound of the chain as the ship tugged at the anchor cable.

A collision seemed almost inevitable, and Thirza braced herself for the moment of impact, but as the little boat was no more than its own length off, Captain Stullen swung the tiller over and the bows whipped round. For a split second way was off the boat, and in that second the sail was ripped down, the securing hooks of the rope ladder were thrust over the rail of the *Foolish Virgin,* and in a great flurry of activity Captain Stullen, Eck Corbett, and young

Doddie Brown, each so close that the three men looked like one, clambered up the ladder and disappeared over the clipper's side.

The oars were already out in the small boat, and Willie Wood was now beside her in the stern sheets, his hand on the tiller. A dozen sweeps brought them well abaft the galley. The oars were silently brought inboard, and the hooks of the second ladder were neatly slung across the rail.

It was only then that the quiet was exploded by the first sounds of fighting . . . a succession of pistol shots and an uproar of voices. Thirza's men swarmed up the second ladder, and she was left with only the Dominie and Alicky Mac.

The noise was deafening. Stullen had instructed the men to make as much noise as possible whenever they got on board, and they were royally obeying their instructions. There was bedlam above. Shouts, pistol-shots, ear-splitting shrieks, the crashing of heavy objects, and, beneath all other sounds, the constant irregular clip of steel-shod boots on wooden decks.

"Can I gang, missus?" Alicky Mac demanded, his hand on the ladder.

"You're supposed to stay," the Dominie said, "and help me guard her." The Dominie was lying full-length along the bottom of the boat. His face gleamed briefly as he spoke, and then disappeared again. He collapsed on his elbows, retching, and was ingloriously sick.

"Missus!" Alicky Mac insisted.

"All right," she agreed. "But be careful."

Alicky Mac began laboriously to ascend the ladder.

Above, the noise continued unabated, rose suddenly, close by the boat, to a fearful shriek as a dark shape hurtled, like a catapulted object, over Alicky Mac's head, and landed with a resounding splash in the sea.

A few second later Thirza saw a head in the water.

She said, "Quick, Dominie! Somebody overboard!" and herself seized an oar and bore it hard against the side of the *Foolish Virgin*, leaning her whole weight on it so that the small boat's stern swung out. "Grab hold of him, Dominie!" she shouted.

"I can't," the Dominie said. He had raised himself on his hands and knees, but could do no more. With an impatient exclamation

Thirza thrust the oar away, and, before the stern could swing back alongside the clipper, ran aft and stretched out in the direction of the man's head. Her own hand was seized in another and held in a vice-like grip.

"Hold on to me, Dominie!" she screamed. For a moment she was in danger of being hauled overboard, but she contrived to wedge both feet into a stretcher, and just as she did so the Dominie, with a superhuman effort, thrust himself forward and collapsed on top of her legs, winding his arms round her knees to anchor her. She was then in no danger of being drawn overboard, only of being pulled apart.

"Can you haul yourself up?" she shouted to the head.

"No," the man panted.

"Give me your other hand, then."

"I canna."

The pain was excruciating. The strain on every part of her body was steadily increasing. She felt that her arms and legs were being torn from their sockets and that one of her breasts, jammed on a rowlock, was being gouged out. She screamed without knowing that she was screaming, reached out her free hand, and grabbed at the bobbing head, her fingers first slipping through and then digging viciously into the man's hair, close to his scalp. She jerked it towards her with all her strength, and the drowning man released his hold on her hand and grabbed at the washstrake.

"Get off my legs!" she shouted to the Dominie, and moaned aloud with relief as he rolled over and freed her.

"Now," she panted to the head, "what's the matter with you?"

"Wounded arm," he said.

"Dominie!"

"I can't. I can't, Thirza."

"You can and will," she said.

Somehow, between them, heaving inch by inch, they got the wounded man, one of the Coastguards, into the boat and laid him on the bottom boards.

"It's his arm," Thirza said. "Can you raise him up a little, Dominie?"

But the Dominie had expended the last of his energy and was lying prostrate across the midships thwart.

Thirza groped about in the dark for something to staunch the wound with, and, finding nothing, tore at her own skirts. She ripped her petticoat to shreds. She bound the wound as best she could, and it was only as she was tying the last knot in her make-shift bandage that she realised that the uproar had ceased on board the *Foolish Virgin* and that the sounds she now heard—could it be? —were the disciplined sounds of a ship being got ready for sea. She began to weep from sheer exhaustion.

A lantern was thrust over the ship's side directly above, and Stullen's voice said in conversational tones, "It's all over. You can step aboard now, ma'am, if you please."

(6)

The *Foolish Virgin*, which only a few minutes before had shown nothing but bare spars, was now covered with her loose canvas from the royals to the decks. The Coastguards, cowed and bewildered, were bundled over the side into the small boat and cast adrift, and all hands were summoned to the falls and the anchor brought to the cat-head. The light sails were set, one after the other, with the precision of clockwork, and soon the clipper was under full sail and heading for the open sea.

Thirza stood on the weather side of the poop, right aft, looking for the last time across the widening stretch of water at the receding shores of Kaysie. She had none of the thoughts appropriate to the occasion. She remembered no particular happy moments, and she did not tag memories on to any of the landmarks she could now only vaguely discern. She was fully aware that she was leaving her home and her homeland, never to return, but her emotions were meantime exhausted, and she felt only very, very tired.

She became aware that Captain Stullen had joined her.

"And now?" she said.

"Now for the open sea."

"Nothing can overtake us, I suppose?"

"Nothing on heaven or earth, ma'am."

She shivered at the blasphemy. They stood in silence for several minutes. The lights of the fishing-fleet were mere pin-pricks of orange in the blackness astern, and the town had lost all shape and was to be identified only from the jutting promontory on which it

stood, and even that had now an impersonal look, like a headland seen on a chart.

Thirza said, "Is the Dominie all right?"

"He will be, after he's slept it off. They gave him some brandy."

"And the coachman?"

"The old fellow?" Stullen said. "Sick as a dog. Here, ma'am, you're shiverin'. Take this coat."

She allowed him to slip a coat over her shoulders. She said, "Where are we going?" not so much because she wanted to know as because she wanted to show him that she was grateful for the coat, and it seemed a reasonable thing to say.

"I don't know," Stullen said. "We might go most any place. But I had thought of North America, that is, if you haven't any partic'lar fancy of your own. I think you would like the States, ma'am. There are some little towns along the Maine coast that put me in mind of Kaysie. But it's turnin' real cold. I think you should go below, ma'am."

"No," she said. It was her duty to stand here, to accept the cold spray in her face, to strain her eyes for glimpses of the land, to pay at least this small physical tribute to her home . . . and to John.

"Once we round the Point," Stullen said gently, "there'll be nothing to see, so you might as well go below, ma'am."

She stole a sidelong glance at him. She had something important to say to him, and the sooner she said it the better. It was a matter on which she was determined to brook no argument. It was a question of propriety.

"I hope you understand, Captain Stullen," she said, "that it will be necessary for you to marry me."

He did not reply.

"Captain Stullen, did you hear me?"

"I heard you, ma'am."

"And you said?"

"I didn't say anything, ma'am. But if you think it necessary . . ."

"I certainly do."

He shook his head in amusement, and she felt, rather than saw, his smile.

"You'll marry me, then?" she pressed.

"If that's the way you want it."

"That is the way I want it," she said, and the words echoed, and went on echoing, in her brain. They had a bitter ring.

She stood there on the poop, cold, damp, and desperately tired long after the last lights of the mainland had faded from sight, and then at last, still without emotion, she shifted the focus of her thoughts and tried to look forward into the future.

She could see nothing there.

It is a pity she could not have foreseen what was to be, for the future was to rise like a phœnix out of her past, and the lives of tens of thousands were to be influenced, far beyond their ken, simply because she, Thirza Skene or Gare, once lived and acted in a certain way. She could not know it, but on that dismal September evening as the *Foolish Virgin* bore her into the unknown, her future lay not ahead but astern of her, back on the shores of the Moray Firth, where now, in the place where the village of Kaysie once stood, there stands to-day a large and prosperous fishing-port, a rich modern town which possesses in perpetuity its own mammoth curing yards and oil-works, its famous harbour, its free, endowed schools, its magnificent public park.

These are the monuments to Thirza Gare, daughter of Kaysie. And there are others, in flesh and blood, the living daughters of Kaysie who bear her name, and who, in turn, will pass it on—the Thirzas of to-day and to-morrow.

All this is her future.

But Thirza, gripping the rail of the clipper ship, saw only the dark, unsettled sky and the endless trail of sea.

THE END

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